MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE: WRITERLY NUDITY AND THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SEXUAL CHASM

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Abstract: *On his way to Rome, Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) made a one-day visit to the city of Vitry-le-François on September 10, 1580. There, he met a female-born man whose male sexual organs had been generated as the erstwhile young girl had been making large strides. The narrative of the event in Montaigne's Essais reflects his interest in the complexities of sexual difference and his critical approach of the regnant scheme of sexual binarity. The present contribution highlights Montaigne's attentiveness to sexual configurations at variance with the male/female template that subtends the normative views upheld by the ecclesiastical and civil authorities of the French sixteenth century. Not being an outspoken advocate of contrarian sexual takes, Montaigne sufficed himself with pointing to the existence of mythological, anthropological and historical accounts implying the categorial inadequateness of subsuming individuals under one of two mutually exclusive sexes. What appears at first to be merely illustrations of anormative sexual forms, is actually meant to open the way toward the validation, within the ambit of sexuality, of Montaigne's foremost ontic principle: "Nature has committed herself not to make any other thing that was not different." On this assumption, Montaigne eventually hints in his comprehensive essay "On some verses of Virgil "at a template of sexual differentiation that dispenses with the prevalent (albeit thoughtless) scheme of dichotomous sexuality. Despite introducing a self-deprecative tone to dissipate possible accusations of propounding an un-Christian stance on sexual matters, the brief passage at stake envisages surrendering the immemorial fixity of sexual compartmentations to the limitless sexual variability that occurs in Nature, thereby setting the theoretical stage for his writerly aspiration to portray himself "tout nud" in a world free of taxonomic closures.*

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Keywords: *androgyny, bisexual mold (moule), branloire, homosexuality, human form, imagination, nakedness, sexual diversity and variability, sexual individuality, transsexuality*.

ΚΑΛΟΝ ΦΡΟΝΕΙΝ ΤΟΝ ΘΝΗΤΟΝ ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΙΣ ΙΣΑ

Sophocles as transmitted by Stobaeus in *De superbia* and inscribed on the ceiling (*troisième travée*) of Montaigne's "library" (see Legros, 2000, pp. 399-401; Montaigne, 2005, p. 12).[2]

1. Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) has been depicted as a writer "who had read all the Ancients and who will be read by all the Moderns" (Todorov, 1998, p. 74).[3] As regards the authors of the past, "thinker and philosopher"[4] Montaigne was especially fond of African Roman playwright Publius Terentius Afer (ca. 195/185 - ca. 159 BCE), whose works he references twenty-four times (Hoffmann, 2018, p. 1817), to whom he dedicates a whole page of th*e Essais* (II, 10, 411),[5] and whose name he expressly mentions on six occasions (Leake, 1981, p. 1241). Besides sharing the canonical view that

[2] Two French renderings of the Greek dictum by contemporary Montaigne scholars read: "Penser à niveau de l'homme: bel accomplissement pour un mortel" (Legros, 2000, p. 399) / "Il est bien que le mortel ait des pensées qui ne s'élèvent pas au-dessus des hommes" (Montaigne, 1985, p. 1424).

[3] "qui a lu tous les Anciens et que liront tous les Modernes"

[4] Thus the characterization of Montaigne by Claude Blum in the volume he edited containing the contributions presented at the Montaigne congress in Dakkar, Senegal, in 1990. In his preface, Blum points out: "En ce pays de large culture [le Sénégal], Montaigne apparaît, depuis plusieurs générations déjà, comme l'un des fondateurs de ce que l''esprit français' a d'universel à transmettre. Les *Essais* y sont considérés comme l'acte de naissance lointain d'une pensée authentiquement libre et qui pose en toute clarté les conditions d'exercise de sa liberté. D'où le sujet choisi en ces lieux et qui ne l'aurait pas été ailleurs, pas encore: 'Montaigne, penseur et philosophe'" (Blum, 1990, p. iii).

[5] Montaigne's *Essais* are cited and referenced according to the Villey / Saulnier edition: Montaigne, 2021. In this instance, "II, 10, 411" remits to: Second Book, Essay 10, page 411. Quotes from Montaigne's one-page preamble are referenced thus: "Au lecteur, 3."

the slave-born Terence was one of finest stylists of Classical Latin, Montaigne hinted at the defining influence that his philosophical and literary outlook had exerted on him. Among the extant sixty-five philosophical and sapiential inscriptions, which Montaigne instructed to have engraved on the beans and joists of the "library" that was annexed to his castle mansion in the Dordogne, France,[6] he included a sentence from Terence's *Heauton Timorumenos* (The Self-Tormentor): "HOMO SVM HUMANI A ME NIHIL ALIENUM PVTO" (Legros, 2000, pp. 339-340; see: Montaigne, 1985, p. 1422; Montaigne, 2005, p. 64).[7] Since the leitmotiv of the common humanness conjured by the dictum reverberates throughout Montaigne's oeuvre,[8] it can be considered the source of his fundamental contention that "each man bears the entire form of the human condition" (III, 2, 805).[9]

2. The supraindividual "human form" that Montaigne conceives of as granting unity to the empirically given human diversity shapes his outlook already in "Au lecteur" (To the reader), the preamble introducing the first edition of the *Essays* published in 1580.[10] Comprising hardly more than twenty lines, this key text remained basically unchanged in the editions of the *Essais* issued during Montaigne's life and in the posthumous edition of 1595 under the care of Marie de Gournay (1566-1645) (see Frame, 1984, pp. 308-309). Before turning twenty years of age, she had been struck with admiration upon reading the volume, eventually seeking to meet Montaigne personally. In the decade preceding his passing (Frame, 1984, pp. 273-277), de Gournay conducted extensive *conférences*—i.e. conversations—with the author, which facilitated her particularly empathic

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[6] For an architectural description of the third floor of Montaigne's tower, where his "library" was located, and its relation to his writing of the *Essays*, see: Cocula & Legros, 2011, pp. 104-117. As regards the books he possessed, see: Cocula & Legros, 2011, pp. 151-161.

[7] "I am a man, I consider that nothing human is alien to me" (see Terence, *Heautontimoroumenos* I, 1, 25).

[8] This is the case even when Montaigne diverts the phrase from its original Terentian meaning, as in the essay "De l'yvrongnerie" (Of Drunkenness) (II, 2, 346).

[9] "chaque homme porte la forme entiere de l'humaine condition"

[10] On the complex role of the preamble in the argumentative deployment of the *Essais*, see: Henry, 1990.

understanding of his thought. Dubbed by the elderly man as "my covenant daughter" (II, 17, 661),[11] Marie de Gournay appears to have embodied the attentive reader that Montaigne had wished for years before making her unexpected acquaintance. An insightful peruser of Montaigne's oeuvre, she had the privilege of experiencing first-hand what he depicts as his "simple, natural, and ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice" (Au lecteur, 3).[12] The advantages of her direct approach of Montaigne has to be qualified, however, inasmuch as his declared commitment to personal transparency was shaded from early on by a significant caveat.

3. As Montaigne suggests from the outset, the reader who has taken the *Essais* in his hands will encounter not merely the general views and opinions of their author, but the unmistakable traits of his individuality. Thus, in a "confessional," proto-Rousseauian gesture, Montaigne details in "Au Lecteur" that "it is myself that I portray,"[13] that "I am myself the subject matter of my book."[14] Accordant with this admission, Montaigne deploys a striking *captatio benevolentiae* when he declares outright that "my flaws will here be read to the life" (Au lecteur, 3).[15] As though it were a matter of course for a *gentilhomme*, however, Montagne sets the limits of his writerly self-disclosure in what he terms "the respect for the public".[16] With this seemingly misty phrase, Montaigne hints at the compromise he had to accept in order to fulfil his task as a critical writer. In this context, Montaigne recurs to the hypothetical tense to convey that he would not have considered restricting his self-depiction to what is societally avowable, had he lived under circumstances untouched by the conveniences and comforts that hinder the self-exposure of the human individual in his plain naturalness.

4. Despite his desire of transparency, Montaigne acknowledges that, out of regard for his societal milieu, he will not be able to disclose the entirety of his life and thought. His self-portrayal is thus marred by the faulty execution of what could have been attainable, if societal mores and the

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[11] "ma fille d'alliance"

[12] "façon simple, naturelle et ordinaire, sans contention et artifice"

[13] "c'est moy que je peins"

[14] "je suis moy-mesme la matiere de mon livre"

[15] "Mes defauts s'y liront au vif"

[16] "la reverence publique"

cultural realizations they enable would not contravene the potentials concealed in the praeter-cultural, untrimmed human nature. Thus, in the main, the deficiencies of Montaigne's self-depiction are due to the unnatural limitations imposed by the culture of his birth. As he concedes in all desirable clarity,

> "Had I been placed among those nations which are said to still live in the sweet freedom of the first laws of nature, I assure you that I would very gladly have portrayed myself here in my entirety and entirely naked" (Au lecteur, 3).[17]

It may well be that this revealing passage was meant to resonate with the "purity" (I, 31, 206)[18] of the savages and barbarians living "entirely naked" (I, 31, 208),[19] which Montaigne mentions, for instance, in "Des cannibales" (Of cannibals). In this regard, it is apposite to remark, however, that the cultural settings of such primal nations are indeed "very close to their original naivety" (I, 31, 206),[20] but they do not constitute an untarnished reflection of what the preamble terms "the first laws of nature" (Au lecteur, 3).[21]

5. While there is no lack of contemporary scholarship focusing on Montaigne's approach of the ethnological differences between historical and geographical groups, his principled take on sexual difference as the subtending organizational premise of every known human society has remained mostly undertheorized to the present. This is the case even in the otherwise valuable contributions included in the Montaigne dictionaries issued in the recent past. Indeed, neither the impressive *Dictionnaire Montaigne* published under the direction of Philippe Desan (Desan, 2018) nor the *Dictionnaire amoureux de Montaigne*, which was single-handedly penned by André Comte-Sponville (Comte-Sponville, 2020), thematize in

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[17] "Que si j'eusse esté entre ces nations qu'on dict vivre encore sous la douce liberté des premiers loix de nature, je t'asseure que je m'y fusse tres-volontiers pint tout entier, et tout nud."

[18] "pureté"

[19] "tous nuds"

[20] "fort voisines de leur naifveté originelle." On the issue of the closeness of primitive nations to their original condition, see: Balmas, 1900, pp. 89-100.

[21] "des premiers loix de nature "

due critical depth Montaigne's recourse to the dichotomous "patron" (i.e., model or paradigm) (see III, 2, 807) of sexual difference and his self-inscription therein as a sexually marked "homme" (human being). While Montaigne generally contributes to cementing the age-old binary scheme of sexuality, he signaled on one occasion his design to undermine the disjunctive sexual scheme. In what appears at first as a merely jocular alternative to the immemorial chasm between the sexes, Montaigne actually encapsulates the interpretive key for appraising his numerous references to sexual variations that go beyond the generally expected binarism of nature that purportedly underpins societal decorum.

6. Echoing the praise of the goddess Venus in Lucrece's *De natura deorum* (Book 1, proem) and anticipating Walt Whitman's contention that sex is "the root of roots: the life below the life!" (Traubel, 1914, p. 453), Montaigne postulates that "[t]he whole movement of the world resolves itself into and conduces to this coupling [of sexual love]. It is a matter infused everywhere; it is a center looked at by all things" (III, 5, 857).[22] Although in Montaigne's Late Renaissance French the umbrella term *sexualité* was not yet available, his oeuvre encompasses a wide spectrum of observations, insights and formulations that betray his pervasive concern for all things sexual. Accordingly, he depicts several varieties of non-normative sexual orientations and behavior—such as male and female homosexuality (Montaigne, 1992, pp. 118 & 6), pederasty ("licence Grecque") (I, 28, 187-188), sexual relationships between humans and animals (II, 12, 472), and necrophilia (III, 5, 882)—, often seeking to frame them within the anthropological or historical contexts of their occurrence.[23] Moreover, Montaigne references at times aspects of sexuality that are viewed today as socio-political or cultural matters of *gender*. The most salient characteristic of Montaigne's sexual approach, however, is his interest in the corporeal marks of *sex* proper, especially when they escape subsumption under the disjunctive scheme of sexual distribution.

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[22] "Tout le mouvement du monde se resoult et rend à cet accouplage: c'est une matiere infuse par tout, c'est un centre où toutes choses regardent"

[23] On the issue of non-normative sexuality, Montaigne further points out that one can observe "certain animals addicted to the love of males of their sex" / "certains animaux s'adonner à l'amour des masles de leur sexe" (II, 12, 472).

7. In the essay "Sur des vers de Virgile" (On some verses of Virgil), which was written and revised between 1585 and 1588, the authorial Montaigne evinces in its last lines a sense of tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation that is also present in the remark he addressed to the prospective readers of his self-portrayal to the effect that there is no reason to spend "your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject" (Au lecteur, p. 3).[24] As regards the sexual views he propounds at the end of the Virgil essay, Montaigne is keen on downplaying their import, dubbing them a "notable commentary, which has escaped from me in a flow of babble" (III, 5, 897).[25] In writing these lines, Montaigne seems to have forgotten the preamble's assurance to abide by the rules of decorum in sexual matters, as he now sets out to opine—pregnantly and under the sign of pretended ludicrousness—about the knotty issue of the man/woman differentiation. Instead of embracing the purportedly self-evident disjunction of the sexes that Church and civil law enforce, Montaigne raises the perplexing claim that "males and females are cast in the same mold"[26] and that "except for education and custom, the difference [between the sexes] is not great" (III, 5, 897).[27] Essentially, Montaigne is suggesting the outrageous proposition that the hiatus between man and woman does not hail from nature itself, but rather from the derivative impact of culture. Given his critical aim to de-naturalize the sexual cleavage, it is safe to assume that Montaigne sought to sidestep the wrath of the unthinking, but mighty powers that be by recurring to the probed means of self-disparaging irony.

8. Montaigne appears to have reckoned with the general dismissal of the premise of a unique sexual mold for men and women as counterintuitive foolishness. The idea would have sound less objectionable, however, had Montaigne attempted to offer empirical evidence in its support, or at least a nature-based framework for its intelligibility. As to the empirical backing that is missing in the Vergil essay, it is apposite to note that already the initial pages of Montaigne's *Journal de Voyage en Italie par la Suisse et l'Allemagne* (literally: Journal of travel to Italy through Switzerland and Germany) remits to a case of sexual transmogrification that potentially reinforces the notion of a common sexual matrix. The manuscript of

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[24] "ton loisir en un subject si frivole et si vain"

[25] "notable commentaire qui m'est eschappé d'un flux de caquet"

[26] "les masles et femelles sont jettez en mesme moule"

[27] "sauf l'institution et l'usage, la difference n'y est pas grande"

Journal, which records the travel Montaigne undertook between June 1580 and November 1581, however, soon went missing. Its recovery and publication took place, almost two centuries later, between 1770 and 1774. The reception of the travel journal was certainly not enhanced by the relative abundance of intimate details and sex-related depictions, which easily overstrained the pudibond erudition of clerics and academics of the time.[28] With an eye on the anthropological assumptions pervasive in the period, it is noteworthy that one of the most risqué passages in *Journal* was dictated by Montaigne to his secretary in 1580, the same year mentioned in the preamble of the first edition of the *Essais*. The sixteen-line passus, which is part of the narrative concerning the initial stages of Montaigne's journey, expands on a stunning, albeit well attested occurrence that, in contemporary parlance, could be characterized as an unintentionally induced, spontaneous instance of transsexuality.

9. According to the entry concerning Montaigne's stay in the city of Vitry-le-François, he was informed on September 10, 1580 about the remarkable story of a young girl nicknamed "*the bearded Marie*" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 6; emphasis in original).[29] As the account goes,

> "One day, as she made an effort to jump, the male organs of Marie were generated, and Cardinal de Lenoncourt, the bishop of Chalons at the time, gave her the name of Germain. He is however not married; he has a long and thick beard. We could not see him because he was in the village. There is still in this city an ordinary song in the mouth of girls, in which they advise each other not to make large strides anymore, for fear of becoming

[28] This assumption accords well with the fact that Guillaume-Vivian Leydet (? - 1776), who copied Montaigne's autograph manuscript of *Journal de voyage* in 1771, omitted scabrous passages in the narrative concerning the condemnation of a group of Portuguese sodomites. Moreover, he translated into Greek phrases he considered indecorous: "en l'eglise de saint jean porta latine, certains portugais quelques années y a estoient entrée en une etrange confrerie ils se εμγμενβεβα το ανδρας τοις ανδραις a la messe avec memes serimonies que nous faisons à nos γαμας faisoient leurs pasques enembles lisoient de mesmes evangile των γαμων […]" (Moureau, 1982, p. 146). For the uncensored version of the passage, see: Montaigne, 1992, p. 118. Almost two centuries earlier, translations had already been used as a means of censorship against sexual explicitness in medical circles. Thus, the reputed surgeon and physician Ambroise Paré was accused in 1575 "d'utiliser le français qui mettait à la disposition des profanes des questions réservées aux experts" (Dubois, 2023, p. 190).

[29] "*Marie la barbue*"

> males like Marie Germain" (Montaigne, 1992, pp. 6-7).[30]

Generally skeptic Montaigne seems to have given credence to the improbable-sounding story, as he remits to its mention in *Des monstres et prodiges*, a chirurgical treatise by Ambroise Paré (ca. 1510-1590), one of the foremost physicians active in the turmoiled period of France's religious wars (see Montaigne, 1992, p. 7; Paré, 1971, pp. 19-20).[31] More importantly, Montaigne underscored the credibility of the transsexual event several years later, in the 1588 version of the essay titled "De la force de l'imagination" (Of the power of the imagination). While this reprise contradicts some relevant details of the J*ournal* version, it adjoins Montaigne's own explanatory take on the reported occurrence in a way that is meant to endorse its fundamental veracity.

10. The *Essais*' concise assessment of the event begins by downplaying its unexplainable character, given that, on Montaigne's assumptions, the imagination and its creational powers play at times a role in human affairs that comes close to that of Nature:

> "It is not so great a marvel that this sort of accident is *frequently* met with. For if the imagination has power in such things, it is so continually and vigorously fixed on this subject that in order not to have to relapse so often into the same thought and sharpness of desire, it [the imagination] is better off if once and for all it incorporates the masculine member *in girls*" (I, 21, 99; emphasis added).[32]

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[30] "Un jour faisant un effort à un sault, ses outils virils se produisirent et le Cardinal de Lenoncourt, Èvesque pour lors de Chalons, luy donna nom Germain. Il ne s'est pas marié pourtant; il a une grand barbe fort espoisse. Nous ne le sceumes voir, parce qu'il estoit au village. Il y a encore en cette ville une chanson ordinaire en la bouche des filles, où elles s'entr'avertissent de ne faire plus des grandes enjambées, de peur de devenir masles, comme Marie Germain."

[31] For a substantial discussion on"Ambroise Paré tératologue," see: Céard, 1996, pp. 292-314. Contending that "Le dessein de Paré […] est fondamentalement de 'naturaliser' le monstreuex en le dépouillant de toute idée d'imperfection et en le considérant comme la forme extrême de cette variété qui plaît tant à la nature" (Céard, 1996, p. 309), Céard interprets Paré's core theoretical concerns as foreshadowing Montaigne's views on diversity and singularity (see Céard, 1996, pp. 399-408).

[32] "Ce n'est pas tant de merveille, que cette sorte d'accident se rencontre frequent: car si l'imagination peut en telles choses, elle est si continuellement et si

In *Journal*, Montaigne was careful to differentiate the case of Marie Germain from that of a transvestite girl named Mary, which the text previously mentions. In her lesbian audacity, Mary married another girl and was consequently punished by hanging for her use of "illicit devices to supply the defect in her sex" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 6).[33] Unlike the convicted Mary, the unmarried Marie Germain truly possessed the "outils virils" (male organs) (Montaigne, 1992, p. 7) / "members virils" (male members) (I, 21, p. 99), which, according to Montaigne's etiological explanation in the *Essais*, were generated by the imagination to avoid the recidivism of phantasmal obsessions. While the *Journal* version makes no mention of the creative imagination as the origin of Marie Germain's sexual metamorphosis,[34] it concurs with the later version in underscoring that *he* remained unmarried

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vigoureusement attachée à ce subject, que, pour n'avoir si souvent à rechoir en mesme pensée et aspreté de desir, elle a meilleur compte d'incorporer, une fois pour toutes, cette virile partie aux filles."

[33] "inventions illicites à suppler au defaut de son sexe"

[34] Indicatively, Paré's seventh chapter titled "Histoires mémorables de certaines femmes qui sont dégénérées en hommes," which includes the passage on Marie Germain referred to by Montaigne, does not mention the causality of the imagination. Paré begins to assess the role that the "vertu imaginative" can play in a sexual-procreative context (Paré, 1971, p. 36) only in the ninth chapter captioned "Exemple des monstres qui se font par imagination." By contrast, Montaigne deals with the imagination already in connection with Marie Germain's transsexuality. This textual relocation of the force of the imagination is significant, as it is accompanied by a profound transformation of the concept in correspondence to Montaigne's overarching non-theistic design. As Paré admits, once he begins to regard the monstrous creatures as part of the exuberant creativity of Nature functioning as the "chambriere du grand Dieu" (Paré, 1971, p. 117), "j'y pers mon esprit" (Paré, 1971, p. 139) and "les principes de Philosophie faillent" (Paré, 1971, p. 68). For Montaigne, however, the sense of awe vis-à-vis the diversity and variability of Nature is not meant as a conduit to the "célébration" or "louange" (Jeanneret, 2015, p. 33) of the Creator. Since, in accordance with Montaigne`s epistemic principle that humans have "aucune communication à l'estre" (II, 12, 601), there is, philosophically speaking, no way for his phenomenology of ever transformative Nature to transmute itself into a doxology of a creational divinity.

even after her persistent urge for having a penetrative organ of *her* own had been fulfilled.[35]

11. Montaigne regretted that the mores of his time would not allow him to portray himself "entirely naked." Despite the social pressure exerted by real or presumed forms of censorship, however, Montaigne was anything but prudish when depicting his own genitals and sexual practices. Thus, with the aid of quotes taken from the anonymous Latin collection of *Carmina priapea* (LXXX, 1 & VIII, 4), Montaigne hints at the fact that his own *mentula* (male member) was neither long nor thick (III, 5, 887). As regards his coital activities, Montaigne admitted: "I cannot, without an effort, […] make children except before going to sleep or make them standing up" (III, 13, 1083).[36] Moreover, concerning the ethical aspects of his sexual conduct, Montaigne readily conceded "not being continent" (I, 37, 229)[37] nor "very chaste" (III, 5, 847),[38] and even acknowledged that "[n]ever was a man more impertinently genital in his approaches" (III, 5, 890).[39] In view of his sexual self-disclosures, it is not surprising that Montaigne eventually directed his attention to what he considered the specific differences between the male and female sexual organs. In this regard, however, he appears to have had only a vague notion of the in-depth homology between penis and clitoris or of the similarities between the male and female "parts […] effectively shameful and embarrassing" (III, 5, 878).[40] Given the relative scarcity of

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[35] Jean Céard dedicates the sixth part of his volume entitled *La Nature et les prodiges* to discussing the "Nouveauté de Montaigne." While Céard refers in this context, for instance, to the brief essay "D'un enfant monstrueux" (II. 30, 712-713), he does not examine Montaigne's depiction of his encounter with Marie Germain in "De la force de l'imagination" (I, 21, 99). It is pertinent to note, however, that, as regards its epistemic stance, this passage signals a break with the assumption of presumed miracles or preternatural prodigies when dealing with rational etiologies. Accordingly, Montaigne attributes the cause of Marie Germain's transsexuality to the human imagination, a this-worldly agency capable of bringing about the transformation of a born female into a natural male.

[36] "Et, sans m'essaier, ne puis […] ny faire des enfans qu'avant le sommeil, ny les faire debout"

[37] "n'estre continent"

[38] "bien chaste"

[39] "Jamais homme n'eust ses approches plus impertinemment genitales"

[40] "parties […] proprement honteuses et peneuses"

reliable sexual knowledge available to non-physicians of the time, it is remarkable that Montaigne could entertain the general notion of a common mold underlying the man/woman differentiation.

12. Montaigne's attempts to relativize the opposition of the binary sexes can be traced back, in Antiquity, to Galen of Pergamon's (129-216 CE) postulation of their core sameness and, in the sixteenth century, to the views advanced by his older contemporary Ambroise Paré. Against this backdrop, Montaigne dealt with the spinous issue of individual sexual transmogrifications. In the case of Marie Germain, Montaigne took the reflexive phrase "ses outils virils se produisirent" as the point of departure of a causal explanation relating her sexual change to the workings of the creative imagination and its purported capacity to generate realities. Thus, although the concrete circumstance that framed Marie Germain's memorable genital "production" was the physical effort made while jumping,[41] the sustaining rationale of the incident was her persistent desire to possess the external markers of maleness. On these assumptions, Marie Germain's imagination recurred to what Montaigne considered the limitless arsenal of possibilities harbored in Nature and substituted her phantasmal genital fixations by the carnal reality of a penis and testicles. Dispensing with positivistic, supernal or satanic etiologies, Montaigne argues in favor of remaining open for the occurrence of the unexpected, an epistemic attitude necessitated by his ontic premise that "the resemblance of events is uncertain, for they are always dissimilar; there is no quality so universal […] as diversity and variety" (III, 13, 1065).[42] In view of these considerations, it becomes apparent that Montaigne's depiction of the

[41] Ambroise Paré's depiction of the circonstances in which Marie Germain developed her male genitals reads as follows: "[…] comme il estoit aux champs et poursuyvoit assez vivement ses pourceaux qui alloyent dedans un blé, trouvant un fossé le voulut affranchir ; et l'ayant sauté, à l'instant se viennent à lui desvelopper les genitoires et la verge virile, s'estans rompus les ligamens par lesquels auparavant estoyent tenus clos et enserrez (ce qui ne luy advint sans douleur), et s'en retourna larmoyant en la maison de sa mere, disant que ses trippes luy estoyent sorties hors du ventre, laquelle fut fort estonnee de ce spectacle. Et ayant assemblé des Medecins et Chirurgiens, pour là dessus avoir advis, on trouva qu'elle estoit homme et non plus fille […]" (Paré, 1971, pp. 29-30).

[42] "la ressemblance des evenemens est mal seure, d'autant qu'ils sont tousjours dissemblables: il n'est aucune qualité si universelle […] que la diversité et varieté"

transsexual event was meant to accord with his scattered insights into the uniquely sexed individual as a natural emergence that escapes the cultural disjunction between maleness and femaleness.

13. The dichotomous template of sexual difference—like any taxological scheme of living organisms—is challenged, according to Montaigne, by the fundamental fact that "[l]ife is an uneven, irregular, and multiform movement" (III, 3, 819).[43] Set in historical perspective, the unusual cases of Marie Germain and the other transsexual girls mentioned in connection with Vitry-le-François appear to confirm the contention Montaigne formulates when discussing the cultural significance of China: "the world is more ample and more divers than either the ancients or we ourselves understand" (III, 13, 1071).[44] It is thus unsurprising that, in the essay captioned "De la diversion" (Of diversion), Montaigne admits his sense of awe vis-à-vis the world's exuberance of forms, remarking: "Variation always solaces, dissolves and dissipates" (III, 4, 836).[45] Although the idea of a chasm separating men from women may at first be considered an indispensable instrumentality warranting the existing societal order, it does so at the price of misapprehending and disfiguring the protean deployments of humanity's sexual nature. The inadequacy of the sexual premises on which all known socio-political bodies are grounded is the result of taxological choices made by cultures that have lost sight of the inexhaustible pool of sexual possibilities from which they derive. While Montaigne as a Catholic subject was no enthusiast of historical disruptions and generally acknowledged being "disgusted with innovation" (I, 23, 119),[46] he readily embraced as a philosopher the "mystic foundation" that relativizes the authority and validity claims of the regnant laws (see III, 13, 1072).[47]

14. Montaigne was seldom explicit about the epistemic consequences to be drawn from his assessment of Marie Germain's transsexuality. His reserve in this regard corresponded to his awareness that any attempt to question and destabilize the binary conception of sexual difference could have

[43] "La vie est un movement inegal, irregulier et multiforme"

[44] "le monde est plus ample et plus divers que ny les anciens ny nous ne penetrons"

[45] "Tousjours la variation soulage, dissout et dissipe"

[46] "desgousté de la nouvelleté"

[47] "fondament mystique"

disastrous consequences for the societies it has structured since times immemorial. Montaigne offers a first clue for understanding his handling of the issue in a brief passage that depicts the standpoint of the prototypical sage confronting unjustifiable societal constraints. Indeed, in the early essay titled "De la coustume et de ne changer aisément une loy reçeüe" (Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law), Montaigne details:

> "it seems to me that all peculiar and out-of-the-way fashions come rather from folly and ambitious affectation than from reason, and that the wise man should withdraw his soul within, out of the crowd, and keep it in freedom and power to judge things freely; but as for externals, he should wholly follow the accepted fashions and forms" (I, 23, 118).[48]

The epitome of Montaigne's pronouncements in favor of maintaining the existing foundations of society is his own flawless public adherence to the Catholic religion of his upbringing. His stance in this respect, however, did not hinder him from upholding strictly personal views against religious and civil restrictions that solely rely on the authority of historic traditions and customs.

15. It was in keeping with the distinguo between publicly conforming to the accepted uses and laws of the land and the freedom to privately criticize and eventually reject them, that Montaigne was extremely careful when it came to articulating contentions critical of the public code of sexual binarity. In this regard, Montaigne sufficed himself with vaguely suggesting that his own stance on sexual matters should be understood in light of his overarching ontic premises. Accordantly, he advised that "the common notions that we find in credit around us and infused into our souls by our fathers' seed," (I, 23, 115-116)[49] are not to be regarded as though they were universal and natural. His declared stance notwithstanding, Montaigne's two depictions of Marie Germain's transsexuality carefully avoid signaling any disagreement with the well-established societal organization of the dichotomic sexes. As already

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[48] "il me semble que toutes façons escartées et particulieres partent plustost de folie ou d'affectation ambitieuse, que de vraye raison; et que le sage doit au dedans retirer son ame de la presse, et la tenir en liberté et puissance des juger librement des choses; mais, quant au dehors, qu'il doit suivre entierement les façons et formes receues"

[49] "les communes imaginations, que nous trouvons en credit autour de nous, et infuses en nostre ame par la semence de nos peres"

mentioned, it is only in the concluding lines of "Sur des vers de Virgile" that Montaigne suggests that the man/woman disjunction does not hail from reason and nature. Montaigne was therewith choosing his most sharply focused essay on love to formulate the sexual implications of his early anti-populist remark that "what is off the hinges of custom, people believe to be off the hinges of reason" (I, 23,116).[50] Against the backdrop of Montaigne's de-naturalizing approach of sexual binarity, Marie Germain's female-to-male transmogrification became a powerful reminder of the impact of Nature's permanent *branloire* on the individual's sexual constitution.[51]

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[50] "ce qui est hors de gonds de coustume, on le croid hors des gonds de raison"

[51] Since the epistemic kernel of Montaigne's "flux de caquet" (III, 5, 897) is the assumption of a single mold from which the sexes emerge, his stance is not totally alien to what Ambroise Paré maintains in a passus of the chapter "Histoires mémorables de certaines femmes qui sont dégénérées en hommes," where he discusses the case of Marie Germain. Clearly drawing on Galen of Pergamon's contentions that women produce semen, but remain unaccomplished men because, due to their lesser degree of heat, they are incapable of extruding their genitals outside their bodies (see Galen, 1992, pp. 173, 175; Galen, 1907-1909, vol. II, pp. 296, 299, 301; Galen, 1992, p. 185), Paré maintains: "La raison pourquoy les femmes se peuvent degenerer en hommes, c'est que les femmes ont autant de caché dedans le corps que les hommes descouvrent dehors, reste seulement qu'elles n'ont pas tant de chaleur ny suffisance pour pousser dehors ce que la froidure de leur temperature est tenu comme lié au-dedans" (Paré, 1971, p. 30). Montaigne did not subscribe to the notion that the male and female sexual organs are basically the same, but, rather to the conception of an identical mold ("mesme moule") from which the unique complexion of the sexed individual comes into being. Instead of the unicity of the two sexes differing only as regards the internal/external locus of their occurrence, Montaigne postulates a unique sexual pattern that allows for the emergence of sexes that are not totally contrasting, since they combine in non-repeatable proportions maleness and femaleness. In this reading of Montaigne's *flow of babble*, Paré's single sex giving rise to its two (and only two) spatially-conditioned forms is transformed in a unique sexual pattern capable of varying without end the male/female combinatory that determines the individual's specific sexuality. From this perspective, Paré's scheme of sexual difference is pre-modern not only because of its binary closure, but also on account of the reason he adduces as to why no man has ever become a woman: "Nature tend tousjours à ce qui est le plus parfaict, et non au contraire faire que ce qui est parfaict devienne imperfaict" (Paré, 1971, p. 30).

16. Like everything else in nature, the sexes and sex itself stand under the aegis of what Montaigne calls "branloire" (or "branle"), the terminological concept he deploys for designating reality's universal Becoming. Signally, the semantic scope of the term comes close to what his younger contemporary Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) referred to as "vicissitudine" (Bruno, 2002b, p. 198) and "vicissitudine di trasmutazione" (Bruno, 2002a, p. 742). As to the meaning of both *branloire* and *branle*, it should be noted that much of their Renaissance French distinctness and associative force gets lost when they are rendered in English by the commonplace notions of *movement*, *motion*, and *move*, as is suggested in the following two translated passages:

> "Does not everything *move* [branle] your *movement* [branle]?" (I, 20,95) (Montaigne, 2003, p. 80; emphasis added).[52]
>
> "The world is but a perennial *movement* [branloire]. All things in it are in constant *motion* [branlent]" (III, 2, 804) (Montaigne, 2003, p. 740; emphasis added).[53]

Beyond referring to mere spatial movement, the notion of *branloire* designates the world's pervasive transformativeness, which is key to Montaigne's unavowed (albeit persistent) attempt to sap the seeming stability of the dichotomic compartmentation of the sexes. It is this alleged permanence that undergirds the Christian-theological conception of the civil (and civilized) society, to which Montaigne paid throughout his oeuvre his most sincere lip service.[54]

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[52] "Tout ne branle-il pas vostre branle? "In a modern French adaptation of the *Essais* this passage reads: "Tout n'a-t-il pas le même *mouvement* que le vôtre?" (Montaigne, 2009, p. 117; emphasis added).

[53] "Le monde n'est qu'une *branloire* perenne. Toutes choses y branlent sans cesse." This passage reads in modern French: "Le monde n'est qu'une *balançoire* perpétuelle. Toutes choses y sont sans cesse *en mouvement*" (Montaigne, 2009, p. 974; emphasis added).

[54] Despite his own Catholic ortho-praxis, Montaigne undermines Christianity's onto-theological premises as he propounds a radically de-ontologizing démarche in the name of reality's "continuelle mutation et branle" (II, 12, 601). It is thus not surprising that Montaigne scholars have at times drawn attention to his affinity to the a-theologies of Zen-Buddhism and Tao (see, for instance, Comte-Sponville, 2020, pp. 615-622).

17. Montaigne certainly knew better than to take over and iterate the common doxa concerning the male/female disjunction and its lurking asymmetry in favor of masculinity. In keeping with the limits imposed by the "respect for the public" when it came to self-portraying himself in the nudity he aspired to,[55] Montaigne revealed obliquely and with great caution his dissenting stance on sexual difference. Thus, while not denying outright the validity attributed to the binary scheme of sexual distribution, Montaigne counterpoints throughout the *Essais* examples and insights that collectively contribute to voiding the assumption of a male/female chasm. Thus, the *Essais* version of the events in Vitry-le-François (see Rigolot, 1992, p. 325) briefly mentions the "frequent" (I, 21, 99)[56] cases of female-to-male transsexuality among the girls of the area. Remarks of this kind, which are often left uncommented, appear to reflect the subversive sexual concerns that, against all expectancies, latently steer the Catholic raised and law-abiding Montaigne. By interspersing hints about sexual diversity and variability throughout his work, Montaigne was building up the case for a principled reconceptualization of the individual's sexual difference at odds with the all-too simplistic *aut/aut* of the sexes and their alleged fixity in time.[57]

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[55] As regards Montaigne's "idée du nu" and related issues, see the somewhat rhapsodic, but insightful remarks by Albert Thibaudet in: Thibaudet, 1963, pp. 154-162.

[56] "frequent"

[57] Montaigne sets the occurrences of transsexuality in or close to Vitry-le-François within a descriptive framework indebted to the empiricism of Renaissance medicine that circumvents the teleology of Christian providence as well as the determinism of the Stoic *fatum*. His approach takes a complexifying turn, however, when he introduces, in the *Essais* version of the narrative, the explanatory notion of *imagination*, which escapes the domain of natural causality but not the ambit of human this-worldliness. What appears at first as a supplement to the expected etiology of nature is, in truth, a decisive step towards its critique, as it aims at revealing the individual's principled exceptionality in a way that is reminiscent of the Epicurean critique of causality (see Hoffmann, 2005, pp. 174-175). In the context of the Marie Germain narrative, the imagination effectuates a transmogrification without recurring to nature's usual pathways of causation. This implies that, as regards Marie Germain, *her rimul*a becomes *his mentula*. Both Latin terms are taken from poetical citations that hint at the time-honored disjunctive conception of sexual differentiation (for *rimula*, see: III, 5, 559: for *mentula*, see: I, 49, 298; II, 12,

18. Montaigne, whose first tongue had been Latin (see I, 26, 173; Jouanna, 2017, pp. 35-36; Lazard, 1992, pp. 56-59; Thibaudet, 1963, p. 17), and who perused the Roman and Greek Classic authors throughout his life, must have been attracted from early on by the sexually complex figure of Tiresias, the blind Apollonian seer of Thebes. According to the extant sources, he was transformed by the goddess Hera into a woman for a period of seven years, in which the seeress even bore children (see Geisau, 1979, vol. 5, p. 558).[58] The foremost transsexual personage of Greek legendary history, Tiresias was almost certainly in the back of Montaigne's

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475; III, 5, 855 and 887). Against this backdrop, the Montaignian imagination introduces an element of chance or randomness in the purportedly natural order of the sexes in order to fulfill the anormative inclinations (i.e., the Epicurian *klinamen)* of Marie German as an individual. Such a chance effectuation by the imagination mirrors the regime of a world subjected to the principle that no two individual occurrences can be identical (see III, 13, 1065).

[58] Clairvoyance and transsexuality, the foremost markers of Tiresias' individuality, point to his knowledge of the future and of his grasp of the opposite sex as capacities beyond the reach of common mortals. Given that the *Essais* throw light on Tiresias's exceptionality, it is surprising that Montaigne remains absent from two significant books dedicated to the ancient seer. In Emilia Di Rocco's *Io Tiresia. Metamorfosi di un profeta*, the author undertakes an analysis of the transformations undergone by the Tiresian myth in the course of Western intellectual history. Arguing that, in the cultural landscape that emerged after the death of Primo Levi (1919-1987)—an unheeded soothsayer of doom—, there is no place "per Tiresia profeta e poeta—per il vate—" (Di Rocco, 2007, p. 397), Di Rocco laconically observes that the prevalent contemporary interest in Tiresias is focused on his protean sexuality. This ascertainment notwithstanding, Di Rocco omits discussing the role of Montaigne as a harbinger of the cultural shift in which the modern significance of Tiresias' sexuality is inscribed. Accordant with Di Rocco's analytical views, Nicole Loroux declared in her 1995 book *The Experiences of Tiresias. The Feminine and the Greek Man* that "it is not the blind seer that interests me here, [but] the Tiresias whose experience of both sexes gives him knowledge about feminine pleasures" (Loraux, 1995, p. 11). Oblivious to Montaigne's role in Tiresias' modern *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the two authors overlook that, from the perspective of the *Essais*, the radical sexual individuality of the ancient priest reflects the universal *branloire* that calls to question the shallow certainties of the dichotomous and immutable sexes. The challenging, in-depth meaning of Tiresias' transsexual vita appears to be effaced from cultural memory, as soon as his testimony for the transformative valence of all-encompassing φύσις is cast aside.

mind as he dictated his report on Marie Germain's sexual metamorphosis on his way to Rome, and then, years later, published a revised account of the event. While Tiresias remains unmentioned in both texts, Montaigne refers to him by name in the 1588 edition of his "Apologie de Raimond Sebond" (Apology for Raymond Sebond) (II, 12, 453). This explicit mention of Tiresias is included in a list of prominent ancient figures headed by Neopythagorean philosopher and thaumaturge Apollonius of Tyana (ca. 3 BCE – ca. 9 CE), who, among other astounding faculties, had the capacity of interpreting the language of animals. Moreover, an implicit reference to transsexual Tiresias is made in the Virgil essay, where Montaigne quotes a verse from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* hinting at the seer's extraordinary gift to play out male and female roles in amorous relationships: "Venus huic erat utraque nota" (III, 5, 854; Publius Ovidius Naso: *Metamorphoses*, III, 323).[59]

19. The dative pronoun *huic* in the Ovidian verse remits to the "ancient priest" (III, 5, 854)[60] previously alluded to, "who had been a man as well as a woman" (III, 5, 854).[61] It is to reinforce this striking assertion that Montaigne adduces the quotation from *Metamorphoses* indicating that the priestly figure had experienced the carnality of male and female love. Given Tiresias' renown throughout Antiquity, Montaigne had no need to underscore that the unnamed personage was identical with the mysterious seer and animal hermeneut mentioned in the essay on Raimond Sebond (see II, 12, 453). On account of his/her sexual self-transmogrifications, Tiresias could testify that women are, "without comparison, more capable and ardent as regards the effects of love than we [males]" (III, 5, 854),[62] therewith implying a critical corrective to the generally assumed preponderancy of the male in sexual matters. More importantly though, as "una figura dagli indistinti confine" (a figure of indistinct boundaries) (Di Rocco, 2007, p. 11), the transsexual priest/ess questions the immemorial validity assigned to the disjunctive separation and temporal fixity of the sexes. Against this backdrop, Montaigne's later suggestion about the single origination of the sexes becomes the basis upon which Tiresias's male/female/male transmogrifications evince themselves as mythemic

[59] "The one and the other [i.e. the male and the female] Venus were known to him."

[60] "prestre ancien"

[61] "qui avoit esté tantost homme, tantost femme"

[62] "plus capable et ardentes aux effects de l'amour que nous"

deployments of Nature's unfathomed sexual potentialities. The core of the Tiresian mytheme thus encodes the ontically dimensioned *branloire* of sexuality in its opposition to the chasm that organizes the taxonomic immovability of the binary sexes. Notwithstanding the differing rationales of myth and empirical observation, Montaigne's references to the transsexuals Tiresias and Marie Germain point to his early modern conception of a life-sustained wellspring of sexual variability and diversity as the crux of his sexual critique.

20. Regardless of the complex imbrications connecting the different descriptive dimensions of human sexuality, Montaigne considered them to be naturally anchored in the individual's sexual anatomy and physiology. The male-to-female-to-male metamorphoses alluded to in the Tiresian mythemic clusters as well as the female-to-male transsexuality of Marie Germain and the other girls in her surroundings were indicative—in Montaigne's understanding—of a *carnal* factuality that stroke a contrast to the more abstractive levels of psychological or societal sexuality, which were to become a privileged focus of sexology in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, signaling her biological femininity, the female Tiresias *bore* children, and, as proof of her nature-based masculinity, Marie Germain ejected *somatically* his "male organs" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 7).[63] Insisting on the ascertainable concretion of Marie Germain's *new* sexual marks, Montaigne adduced the authoritative confirmation of his sexual transformation by a Cardinal of the Roman Church and by Ambroise Paré's reputed "book on surgery" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 7; see Paré, 1971, pp. 29-30).[64] Despite the parallels between the ancient and modern transsexual occurrences, the multiple sexual transmogrifications of unique Tiresias mentioned in the mythemic records and echoed by Montaigne contrast with Marie Germain's one-directional, female-to-male change, which was by no means an isolated event in her region. For, as Montaigne is careful to underscore, the imagination occasionally incorporates the "masculine member *in girls*" (I, 21, 99; emphasis added).[65]

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[63] "outils virils"

[64] "livre de chirurgie"

[65] "virile partie aux filles"

21. Despite the skepticism that permeates his elaborations on God and the universe, Montaigne regarded certain empirically verifiable axioms as the groundwork of philosophical reflection. Thus, having observed that there is no identical repetition of two entities in nature, Montaigne went on to argue that the empirical evidence belies any attempt to dismiss the unique differences between individual things that the inexorable *branloire* of Nature brings about. In a passage at the beginning of "De l'experience" (Of experience), Montaigne conveys his stance on the issue with enviable concision:

> "Dissimilarity intrudes by itself into our works; no art can attain similarity. […] Ressemblance does not make something so much alike [to something else] as difference makes other [unlike]. Nature has committed herself not to make any other thing that was not different" (III, 13, 1065).[66]

On these assumptions, the exceptionality of Tiresias' sexual transmutations (not seldom regarded as monstrous or miraculous) evinces itself as a quasi-mythemic corroboration of Montaigne's rational premise concerning the uniqueness of every natural entity. He thus regrets that the "poor people taken in by their own follies" (I, 27, 179)[67] tend to overlook or silence the issue, especially when subsuming distinct sexual individuals under identical sexual categories that eventually give rise to hypostatized sexual groups.

22. The moral pledge of truthfulness that Montaigne makes in the preamble of the *Essais* presupposes his commitment to rejecting any empirical statement raising claims to universal validity. Thus, despite his declared respect for the civil etiquette banning nudity from authorial self-representations, Montaigne eventually ascertained that the constrictive force of the ban was far from being historically constant. While certainly aware of the challenges he posed early on to sacrosanct beliefs and traditions concerning the difference of the sexes, Montaigne deployed only in the third book of the *Essais* a mechanism of self-disparagement that would allow him to envisage the dissolution of the man/woman binomial

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[66] "La dissimilitude s'ingere d'elle mesme en nos ouvrages; nul art peut arriver à la similitude. […] La ressemblance ne faict pas tant un [semblable] comme la difference faict autre [différent]. Nature s'est obligée à ne rien faire autre, qui ne fust dissemblable."

[67] "pauvre peuple abusé de ses folies"

without incurring the severe punishment it would call for if taken seriously. Inscribed within the discursive movement of a book that has been dubbed "infini" (infinite, or rather unfinishable) (Todorov, 2001, p. 7), Montaigne's de-ontologization of the male/female template canceled the theoretical support that underpinned the ban of male nudity in the presence of the *opposite* sex. There being no mutually exclusive sexes in the natural reality Montaigne sought to reveal, it goes without saying that his original concept of "respect publique" had to undergo a thorough revision in order to accommodate his outlook of radical sexual individuation.

23. In view of Montaigne's elaborations on Marie Germain's transsexuality, there is no denying that he heralded contemporary developments in sexual research and medicine. This is especially patent when considering a book on the science of sex differences titled *Sexing the Brain*, which was penned by neurobiologist and animal behaviorist Lesley Rogers. In her contribution, Rogers thematizes instances of anatomical sex changes that have occurred without the assistance of surgical interventions or hormonal medication among the members of families residing in Dallas, Texas, and in the Dominican Republic. In both settings, a genetic condition was diagnosed that caused males to

> "have a female physique until they reach puberty, at which point they appear to change sex. The penis begins to grow and the testes descend. Until then, these genetic males look like normal girls and are raised as such. At puberty they change to living as men" (Rogers, 2001, p. 31).[68]

These relatively recent cases of spontaneous transsexuality are obviously reminiscent of the case of Marie Germain, who unexpectedly produced her own "outils virils."[69] Aside from the clear differences between the

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[68] As Lesley Rogers further details, the genetic condition at stake effects that the males become unable to produce the reductase enzyme that converts testosterone to 5-dihydrotestosterone until they reach puberty. This hormone leads to the growth of the penis and to the testes descending into the scrotum.

[69] It is worth noting that, according to Ambroise Paré, Marie's sex change took place when she was fifteen years old ("au quinziesme an des son aage") (Paré, 1971, p. 29). Furthermore, Paré's designation of the organs that Marie Germain ejected from her body is more specific than the one deployed by Montaigne. While Paré distinguishes between "les genitoires et la verge virile" (Paré, 1971, p. 21), Montaigne utilizes the more general terms *male organ* or *male member*.

Montaignian narratives and the medical reports as regards the epistemic paradigms on which they rely, both approaches contribute to denting the alleged certainties concerning the separating line between man and woman.

24. Although his depictions and remarks concerning human genitality are closely connected with the other descriptive levels of sexuality he occasionally considers, Montaigne clearly distinguishes between the genital mark of the individual and the other sexual traits that configure his bodily features, psychological dispositions and societal behavior. As a foremost exemplification of the Heraclitan notion that "all things are in flux […] and perpetual variation" (II, 12, 601-602; see III, 9, 994),[70] genitality indexes Nature's subtending transformativeness beyond personal or cultural constrictions. Thus, while Marie Germain initially had a little more hair around her chin than other girls, her actual sexual transmogrification took place as her virile *outils* came forth at age twenty-two and was in time consolidated as she grew "a big, very thick beard" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 7).[71] The stunning emergence of her male organs called for a re-inscription of her sexuality in a natural framework that, while contravening the fixed sexual assignment of sexuality at the time of her birth, accorded well with Montaigne's overarching philosophical axiom that "there is no existence that is constant, either of our being or of that of objects" (II, 12, 601).[72] How undramatic the dénouement of Marie Germain's transsexual vita turned out to be, becomes apparent when considering that he had become an "old and unmarried" man (I, 21, 99)[73] by the time Montaigne met him on September 10, 1580.

25. Irrespective of other markers of masculinity Marie Germain may have featured, only *her* penis and scrotum appear to have counted as the definitive proof that she had transformed herself into a man and that she could therefore be societally recognized as such. Confirming her sexual reassignment, Marie received the male name *Germain* either from the Bishop of Saisson (as the *Essais* assert) or from Cardinal of Lenoncourt (in the *Journal* version of the narrative). Needless to say, this divergence is far

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[70] "toutes choses sont en fluxion […] et variation perpetuelle"

[71] "une grande barbe fort espoisse"

[72] "il n'y a aucune constante existence, ny de nostre estre, ny de celuy des objects"

[73] "vieil, et point marié"

less significant than the one related to the question as to whether Montaigne actually met Marie Germain. Given the discrepancies between the two reports, it should be kept in mind that while Montaigne dictated the *Journal* version of the narrative *in situ* to his secretary and presumably never properly revised it, the version inserted into the *Essais* in 1588 was reviewed by Montaigne himself each time the book was reissued. Clearly contradicting the assertion in *Journal* that "we were not able to see him [Germain] because he was in the village" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 7),[74] Montaigne asserts in the *Essais* that "I could see a man" (I, 21, 99)[75] in Vitry-le-François, to whom the name *Germain* had been given to ratify his female-to-male transformation. Since the *Essais* version constitutes a carefully edited text, the chances are that it is more truthful to the facts it depicts than the one Montaigne dictated years earlier to his amanuensis. Perhaps more importantly though, the two texts differ substantially from one another as regards their broader narrative contextualization. While the *Essais* version is only loosely connected to the previous paragraph mentioning sexual metamorphoses that had occurred earlier in Italy (I, 21, 98-99), the *Journal* entry is preceded by the depiction of a fake sex change that ends up with the execution by hanging of the culprit, a girl named Mary, who had dared to pass as a man.

26. Upon their arrival in Vitry-le-François, Montaigne and his fellow travelers (Thibaudet, 1963, p. 37) heard about the execution of Mary in the nearby location of Montirandet. As to the noteworthy events leading up to the hanging, the travel journal details that years earlier a group of seven or eight girls from Chaumont-en-Bassigni plotted "to dress up as males" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 6)[76] and live the rest of their lives in their new attire. Amid them was Mary, a weaver by profession, who had settled in Vitry-le-François and whom Montaigne depicts as a "well-disposed young *man*" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 6; emphasis added).[77] Eventually, Mary became engaged to a woman, but the couple parted soon after. Subsequently, the manly weaver moved to Montirandet, where *he* fell in love with a woman whom *he* married and with whom *he* lived together for several months "to

[74] "Nous ne le sceumes voir, parce qu'il estoit au village"

[75] "je peuz voir un homme"

[76] "de se vestir en masles"

[77] "jeune homme bien conditionné"

her satisfaction" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 6; emphasis added).[78] In this period, someone from Mary's native Chaumont became aware of her fake male identity and brought the issue to the courts. Montaigne depicts the resolution of the story following Mary's condemnation in poignant terms. After citing the weaver's declaration that he would rather be hanged than "*to go back to the status of a girl*" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 6; emphasis in original),[79] the account mentions what appears to be the courts' actual reasoning behind the condemnation: She "was hanged for her illicit inventions designed to supply the defect in her sex" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 6).[80] The crime Mary was accused of having committed thus consisted in having come up with devices that allowed *him* to penetrate *his* wife, despite not possessing a penis of *his* own.

27. Unlike Mary the alleged husband, bearded Marie was never troubled by the watchdogs of the judicial system, given that the flesh-and-blood penis she had ejected from her body was deemed proof of her natural masculinity, although he apparently never put it into procreative use. As Montaigne suggests, Marie had always had the strong desire of being the man she will become (I, 21, 99), while Mary identified herself as a man despite her lack of male genitals. The contrast between the unmarried Marie, who became Germain and thus a *de jure* anatomical man, and the masculine-looking Mary, whose female anatomy was at odds with her male desire for women, undoubtedly sharpened Montaigne's grasp of the bio-societal complexities of sexual difference. In the social order of Montaigne's world, there was no doubt that it was the genitality of birth that determined the sexual assignation of a child. Questioning and scrutinizing the issue (as Montaigne probably did in private) risked an unwelcome complexification of the clear-cut differentiation between man and woman as a condition for establishing potentially procreative unions or for consecrating the lives of presumed anatomical males and females in the exclusive service of the Church. In a Christian cosmos of exclusionary oversimplifications based on the man/woman dichotomy, the hanging of Mary constituted the lesbian correlate to the collective execution by

[78] "avec son consentement"

[79] "*se remettre en estat de fille*"

[80] "fut pendue pour des inventions illicite à supplir au defaut de son sexe"

burning of several male/male sodomites hailing from Portugal, who "had entered into a strange brotherhood" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 118).[81]

28. Having arrived in Rome, Montaigne took active part in the rich ceremonial and liturgical life of the city. In the entry of March 18, 1581, his travel journal indicates that an acquaintance "humourously" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 118)[82] mentioned to Montaigne that on that same day, as part of the Holy Week services, the so-called *station* would be celebrated at the Church of San Giovanni Porta Latina, where years earlier the Portuguese same-sexers had been burnt alive.[83] As to their lifestyle and sexual mores, Montaigne is careful to point out that

> "They married one another, male to male, at Mass, with the same ceremonies that we perform at our marriages, celebrated Passover together, read the same marriage gospel, and then went to bed and lived together" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 118).[84]

The entry does not suggest, however, that the group's liturgical activities would have hardly been possible without the acquiescence and active participation of officiating clerics. This assumption seems unavoidable in view of the public notoriety the brotherhood had attained. Not by chance, "the Roman wits" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 118)[85] mentioned by Montaigne were outspokenly concerned over the scandalous sodomitic deeds of the otherwise fervent Catholics. As *Journal* highlights, they

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[81] "estoient entrés en une estrange confrerie"

[82] "plaisamment"

[83] Although Montaigne makes no further comment on the national appurtenance of the doomed same-sexers, it is well to note that among French and Italian writers of the period, the term *Portuguese* was often used to refer to New Christians from the Iberic Peninsula. In this connection, literary scholar Géralde Nakam points out: "'Nation' désigne une communauté d'étrangers dont les droits sont reconnus en tant que tels. Les termes de 'nation espagnole', ou plutôt encore de 'nation portugaise' désignaient les Nouveaux Chrétiens immigrés d'Espagne et de Portugal" (Nakam, 1993, p. 55). It seems thus safe to assume that the courageous sodomite Portuguese burnt at the stake were either Jewish converts to Christianity or their descendants.

[84] "Ils se espousoient masle à masle à la Messe, avec mesmes ceremonies que nous faisons nos mariages, faisoient leurs pasques ensemble, lisoient ce mesme evangile des nopces, et puis couchoient et habitoient ensemble."

[85] "les esprits Romains"

> "maintained that since in the other conjunction, of male and female, this circumstance of marriage alone makes it legitimate, it had seemed to these perspicacious people that this other [male/male] activity would become equally legitimate if it would be authorized by the ceremonies and mysteries of the Church" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 118).[86]

29. It hardly needs stressing that, according to Roman Catholicism's moral teachings, the sin of anal penetration committed by a man with another man, with a woman or with an animal deserved severe punishment. Thus, it could only be expected that Montaigne, his Roman acquaintance, as well as the local wits would go out of their way to distance themselves from the *contra naturam* practices of the Portuguese fraternity, which they ridiculed or considered worthy of sardonic praise. Lastly, the sly attempt of the Lusitanians to equate the Church's sacramental legitimization of coital activity in heterosexual marriages with the performance of rites sanctifying their sodomitical unions was of no avail. As the sentence in *Journal* that closes the depiction of their case asserts, "Eight or nine Portuguese of this fine [belle] sect were burnt" (Montaigne, 1992, p. 118).[87] Although the termination of their daring venture is remindful of the execution of Mary the lesbian weaver, there is a crucial difference between the two legal killings, which derives from the Christian premise of an axiological disparity between man and woman. While both condemnations dealt with transgressions against the other-sex societal order, the assumption of an essential asymmetry between those who do not have a penetrative penis and those who do, led to the divergence between the relatively lenient punishment of Mary by hanging and the atrocious sentence of the sodomite Portuguese to be burned alive at the stake.

30. Had Mary limited the intercourse with his/her wife to touchings and rubbings, the chances are that she would not have been given the capital punishment. As already indicated, however, her sin consisted in the invention and use of artifacts that compensated for her lack of male sexual organ. Being a born woman, she could hardly have been suspected of performing anal-penetrative activities. Given that the accusations against

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[86] "disoient que, parce qu'en l'autre conjonction, de masle et femelle, cette seule circonstance la rend légitime, que ce soit en mariage, il avoit semblé à ces fines gens que cette autre action deviendroit pareillement juste, qui l'auroit autorisée de ceremonies et mysteres de l'Eglise"

[87] "Il fut bruslé huict ou neuf Portugais de cette belle secte."

her appear to have been focused on her recourse to an ersatz penis to penetrate the vagina—not the anus—of her spouse, it is unlikely that she could have been accused of sodomy. Although the explicit term *sodomy* is absent from *Journal* as well as from the *Essais*, it was inevitably implied when dealing with the coital practices of the Portuguese same-sexers in Rome. Sodomy being in the eyes of the Catholic institution the most abject of carnal sins since it constitutes a direct perversion of the divinely intended order of procreation, its publicly upheld practice among the Iberic parishoners of the Roman basilica called for the most drastic of expiations. Their unheard-of boldness to seal their intrinsically sinful unions with the Church's sacramental blessings, apparently excluded doctrinal or legal argument in favor of leniency.[88] Considering the almost certain connivance

[88] Considering what appears to be Montaigne's mild surprise at the ritual and sexual practices of the Portuguese, it is well to remind that marriages between two men accompanied by some kind of sacramental blessings occasionally took place within Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity during the Middle Ages. As historian and philologist John Boswell (1947–1994) argued in his controversial 1994 volume *The Marriage of Likeness: Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, the rite called *adelphopoiesis* (literally: *the making of brothers*) was viewed in some quarters as a sexual union comparable to marriage (see especially Boswell, 1994, pp. 218-260). Continuing this mostly suppressed Church practice, same-sex marriages have been celebrated in the recent past by some sectors of the Anglican Communion. The blessing of homosexual couples is the subject of an ongoing theological debate within Roman Catholicism. As already Boswell's book title conveys, his arguments are based on the axiomatic distinction between same-sex and other-sex combinatories, so that the kind of tolerance for which he pleaded consisted in the acceptance of male/male sexual conjunctions among Christians. The assumption Boswell shared with his heteronormative Christian colleagues is that there are men and women in created nature. Boswell would differ from them, however, by contending that men and women can be sacramentally united, in accordance to Church traditions, to form either same-sex or other-sex couples. Viewed from a principled stance, Boswell's line of argument contravenes Montaigne's overarching assumption that two individual beings cannot be subsumed under the same sexual category (see: II, 12, 601-602; III, 13, 1065) and thus are not apt to constitute unions based on the identitarian premise of sexual sameness. As a Catholic and historian, Boswell apparently never realized that there is no male/female chasm, but only a continuum of individuals featuring unique combinations of male and characteristics. Never having truly questioned the binary sexual template, Boswell

of at least certain members of the clergy in the group's same-sex marriage celebrations, it is safe to assume that the Church as institution felt constrained to convey its unrestrained reprobation of the sodomitic abomination by turning the Portuguese "belle secte" to ashes.

31. Before undertaking his travel to Rome, Montaigne had already begun delineating the theoretical backdrop for his discussion of sexual diversity. Especially relevant in this regard is the fact that, in the process of writing "De la coustume" between 1572 and 1574, Montaigne attained a clear awareness that human opinions and customs are "infinite in subject matter, infinite in diversity" (I, 23, 112).[89] This ascertainment undoubtedly had far-reaching repercussions on his grasp of sexuality. His extensive readings allowed him to familiarize himself with views from Classical antiquity and the New World that flatly contradicted the sex-related assumptions that the Renaissance inherited from the Late Middle Ages. Thus, as though to strike a contrast with the prevalent sexual theo-politics of his time and its homophobic approach of same-sex dissidence, Montaigne quotes a passage from none lesser than Aristotle to the effect that "by *custom* as well as by *nature* males do have intercourse with males" (I, 23, 115, emphasis added; see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 6).[90] Moreover, Montaigne seems to have assumed that the Aristotelian view on the naturalness of same-sex sexuality was corroborated by the increasing anthropological evidence provided by conquistadors and world travelers. Thus, he noted in "De la coustume," for instance, that "[t]here are peoples among which public brothels of males, and even [male/male] marriages can be observed" (I, 23, 112).[91]

32. Some of Montaigne's aperçus about human sexuality hardly harmonized with the claims to universal validity raised by the anthropological teachings of the Church. The cases of non-normative sexuality Montaigne discusses were obviously intended to underpin the view that all things sexual are subjected to ineradicable variability, thereby

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sufficed himself, in the main, with rejecting the claim that only marriages between a man and a woman are sanctioned by Church tradition.

89 "infinie en matiere, infinie en diversité"

90 "autant par coustume que par nature les masles se meslent aux masles"

91 "Il en est [des peuples] où il se void des bordeaux publicz des masles, voire et des mariages"

echoing his overarching premise that "constancy itself is nothing but a more languid motion" (III, 2, 805).[92] Accordant with his epistemic design to reassess sexual diversity, the case of Marie Germain became the empirical fulcrum of a paradigmatic démarche seeking to show that sexual differences have the potential to trigger striking forms of sexual dissidence. On this account, Montaigne was extremely prudent when expressing sexual views that could provoke the ire of the ecclesiastical censorship apparatus. Moreover, Montaigne could not allow himself to disregard that, between 1580 and 1581, the papal censors had examined the *Essais* and provided queries and comments related to possible deviations from Church doctrine. Notwithstanding the courteous tone of the interactions between author and censors, the reception of the book in clerical circles remained ambiguous in Montaigne's lifetime (see Frame, 1982, pp. 217-218). Lastly, it did not come as a surprise when, on January 28, 1676, the *Essais* were included in the *Index of Prohibited Books* (see Bakewell, 2011, p. 152; Frame, 1982, pp. 170; 310-311). Against this backdrop, it proved to be a posthumous advantage for Montaigne that he had once invoked the authority of Socrates—"such a holy image of the human form" (III, 12, 1054)[93]—when defining his own take on the diversity of the human sexual condition.[94]

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[92] "La constance mesme n'est autre chose qu'un branle plus languissant"

[93] "une si saincte image de l'humaine forme"

[94] Motntaigne's admiration for Socrates' humanity accords well with his own fundamental assumption that, there being no communication with Being (see II, 12, 601), there is no way of circumventing the skeptical approach of purportedly definitive truths, whether revealed or natural. Religion and philosophy being unable to overcome the doubts posed by the human condition, the already mentioned French structural anthropologist and philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss contended that Montaigne confronted dogmatical positions by embracing the exemplary attitude of the *sage* vis-à-vis unresolvable existential issues. In his study titled "En relisant Montaige," Lévi-Strauss depicts Montaigne's way out of his own "scepticisme conséquent" (Lévi-Strauss, 1991, p. 286) in the following terms: "La philosophie de Montaigne pose que toute certitude a la forme *a priori* d'une contradiction, et qu'il n'y a rien à chercher par-dessous. La connaissance, l'action sont à jamais placées dans une situation fausse: prises entre deux systèmes de référence mutuellement exclusifs et qui s'imposent à elles, bien que la confiance même temporaire faite à l'un détruise la validité de l'autre. Il nous faut pourtant les apprivoiser pour qu'ils cohabitent en chacun de nous sans trop de drames. La

33. It is noteworthy that Montaigne deemed opportune to increase the references to Socrates each time a new edition of the *Essais* was issued (see Leake, 1981, p. 1177).[95] As is patent in the third and last book of the *Essais*, his elaborations on Socrates' non-conforming sexuality grew in precision and depth. Accordingly, the Virgil essay contains Montaigne's perhaps most terse formulations concerning Socrates' understanding of male-male eroticism and his rebuff of pederasty. While modern and contemporary sensibilities have often associated the ancient philosopher with a rather diffuse conception of practicing homosexuality, Montaigne highlighted that Socrates' outspoken attraction to male youths was accordant with his ethical code of conduct. As Montaigne's further elaborations imply, Socrates' erotic loves were not instantiations of what has often been termed Socratic love, let alone *Greek license*, a sexual ethos "rightly abhorred by our customs" (I, 28, 187).[96] To substantiate his assessment of Socrates' sexual proclivities, Montaigne quotes in the Virgil essay his presumed words as transmitted in Xenophon's *Symposium* (IV, 27). In the cited passage, Socrates deploys a compelling comparison to depict his feelings for a youth he had fallen in love with:

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vie est courte: c'est l'affaire d'un peu de patience. Le sage trouve son hygiène intellectuelle et morale dans la gestion lucide de cette schizophrénie" (Lévi-Strauss. 1991, p. 288).

[95] Consistent with this philological ascertainment, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), the theoretician of *Geisteswissenschaften* as disciplines relying on philosophic hermeneutics and analytic (i.e. non-explanatory) psychology, underscored Montaigne's preference for Socrates among the ancient philosophers: "Mit den Skeptikern verwirft er [Montaigne] die ganze Metaphysik, aber er findet mit Sokrates, den er besonders verehrt, in der Reflexion über uns selbst und in dem natürlichen Gesetz des Sittlichen die dem Menschen offenstehende Wahrheit, und alles echt Sokratische vereinigt er zu einer Grundlage für die Leitung des Lebens" (Dilthey, 1977, p. 38). At the same time, however, Dilthey argued that Montaigne surpassed the weltanschauungs of Antiquity: "Er [Montaigne] ist Sokratiker, Stoiker, Schüler der Tusculanen, des Seneca und Plutarch. Aber er ist mehr. Der gesammelte Reichtum von Material, die gesteigerte Kraft der Selbstbeobachtung, die Zunahme des Individuellen in der geistigen Physiognomie, eine feinere Modulation gleichsam in der Seelenstimmung reichen über die Alten hinaus" (Dilthey, 1977, pp. 38-39).

[96] "justement abhorrée par nos moeurs"

> "When I had leaned my shoulder against his and brought my head close to his, as we were looking into a book together, I suddenly felt, frankly, a stinging in my shoulder like some animal's bite, and I was more than five days with it prickling, and it flowed a continual itching into my heart" (III, 5, 892).[97]

34. Immediately following Socrates' erotic avowal, Montaigne elaborates on the personal dimension of the philosopher's pronouncements. In this context, Montaigne points to the disproportion between the occurrence of a slight, unintended physical contact and the erotic reverberations it set free in the aging sage:

> "A touch, and an accidental one, and by a shoulder, will inflame and alter a soul cooled and enervated by age, and the first of all human souls in reformation!" (III, 5, 892).[98]

Seeking to further gauge Socrates' inordinate feelings, Montaigne asks a rhetorical question that he himself retorts with an enlightened, de-idealizing acknowledgement of the philosopher's full humanity. Thus, after admitting the sexual a-normativity of the "master of masters" (III, 13,1076),[99] "the wisest man that ever was, according to the testimony of gods and men" (III, 13, 1076),[100] Montaigne closes this part of his intervention with a curt averment:

> "Indeed, why not? Socrates was a man, and wanted neither to be nor to seem anything else" (III, 5, 892).[101]

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[97] "M'estant […] appuyé contre son espaule de la mienne et approché ma teste à la sienne, ainsi que nous regardions ensemble dans un livre, je senty, sans mentir, soudein une piqueure dans l'espaule comme de quelque morsure de beste, et fus plus de cinq jours depuis qu'elle me fourmilloit, et m'escoula dans le cœur une demangeaison continuelle."

[98] "Un attouchement, et fortuite, et par une espaule, aller eschauffer et alterer une ame refroidie et esnervée par l'aage, et la premiere des toutes les humaines en reformation!"

[99] "le maistre des maistres"

[100] "Le plus sage qui fut oncques, au tesmoignage des dieux et des hommes." This sentence was a comment Montaigne added to the 1588 edition. The Villey-Saulnier text reproduces it in a footnote.

[101] "Pourquoi non dea? Socrates estoit homme; et ne vouloit ny estre ny sembler autre chose."

Notwithstanding its occasional hyperbole, Montaigne's line of argument attempts to grasp Socrates' deranging sexuality in a way that belies the commonsensical assumptions concerning the exclusive appropriateness of the male/female combinatory. On the whole, Montaigne's approach of Socrates' homoeroticism accords well with the critical contention subtenting what he jokingly dubs his *flux de caquet*: the principled dismantlement of the disjunctive sexes and the rejection of the universal normativity attributed to the conjunction of man and woman.

35. While contributing to undermining the heteronormative premises of Athenian society, the Montaignian Socrates did not embrace the subcultural praxis of coital activity between pederasts and their adolescent partners. Nevertheless, Socrates' exemplary humanity was informed by his same-sex inclinations, leading to the acknowledgement of the specifically ethical dimension inherent to the universal occurrence of male-male sexuality. That Montaigne was aware of Socrates' wholehearted embracement of his homoerotic propensities, however, does not imply that he personally shared them.[102] Despite the divergence between the two men concerning their individual sexual orientations, Montaigne held in high esteem Socrates' challenge of thoughtless sexual conventions, which was effectively at odds with his own docile approach of the regnant sexual mores in sixteenth century France. In this regard, it is worth noting that Montaigne avoided expressing the slightest regret when reporting on the capital punishment that was handed out to same-sex offenders. While it is safe to assume that the condemning judges were convinced of the creational naturalness of heteronormative sexuality, the textual evidence shows that Montaigne's sexual stance was at the antipodes of this kind theological credulity. Being profoundly un-Christian in his core outlook, Montaigne embraced the sexual diversity and variability that Nature brings about, but without accepting or justifying the pederastic forms of sexual intercourse Socrates had rejected with words and deeds. It is certainly not by chance that, in "De l'amitié" (Of friendship), Montaigne rebuffed what he terms the license of the Greeks, remarking that

[102] While Montaigne gives no signs of pederastic inclinations, his "parfaicte amitié" (perfect friendship) (I, 28, 186) with Étienne de La Boétie has been viewed as indicative of a "spiritual" or "structural" homosexuality (see Bauer, 2024, pp. 48-52).

> "since it involved, according to their practice, such a necessary disparity in age and such a difference in the lovers' functions, it could not correspond closely enough with the perfect union and harmony [of lovers] that we require here" (I, 28, 187).[103]

36. Montaigne's scrutiny of sexuality began by ascertaining the cumulative empirical evidence supporting the diversity of individual sexual complexions. The result of his sexual observations corroborated the overarching axiom that there is no possible identity between two discrete individuals. Since the existing sexual diversity of individuals hinders on principle the formation of *same*-sex (*homo*-sexual) conjunctions, any sexual group purportedly based on the sexual sameness of its members—as for example the group of "males," "females," or "third sexers"—evinces itself lastly as a void set. Despite their practical-organizational value, subsumptions of individuals under categories of sexual identity only reflect the arbitrary criteria deployed by cultures to obnubilate the perception of the ongoing proliferation of sexualities in nature. Montaigne's elaborations on the sexual *moule* are thus not meant to advance a conception of sexual difference separating human groups, but rather the idea of a unique modulation of the male/female polarity within each sexed individual. The notion of "human form" Montaigne deploys in critical junctions of his thought is thus neither masculine nor feminine, as it encodes the whole range of sexual variability that each individual actualizes differently. Accordant with this line of thought, Socrates embodied for Montaigne the "holy image" of the "human form," which, being free from specific sexual determinations, allows to actualize those unique potentials of the sexed individual that cultural misunderstandings of human nature seek to uniformize.

37. Montaigne's pithy elaborations on the common sexual *mold* include in their middle a six-line quotation from Latin poet Catullus' (ca. 84 - ca. 54 BCE) *Carmina* (LXV, 19f). The poetical citation appears to underscore Montaigne's "rubor" (blush) when articulating the contrarian sexual views he will eventually halfheartedly recant. While the explicit mention of bio-physical differences between man and woman was deemed to create a sense of social unease and was therefore generally avoided in the

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[103] "pour avoir, selon leur usage, une si necessaire disparité d'aages et difference d'offices entre les amants, ne respondoit non plus assez à la parfaicte union et convenance qu'icy nous demandons"

aristocratic circles of a writerly *gentilhomme*, Montaigne counterproductively prolongs and exacerbates the inconvenience by naming the tickly issue at stake and then seeking to elide it. His main design was obviously to target not just the time-honored hiatus between the sexes but also the theo-political power that cements their hierarchical structuration. Implicitly acknowledging that his reading audience could be overstrained by his attempt to sap sexual binarity as the organizing scheme societal life, Montaigne mellows his outrageous proposal by suggesting that it is unworthy of being taken seriously. Interestingly, his rhetorical disclaimer disowns what has been said, but maintains intact the deranging thrust of its articulation. Given that Montaigne's depiction of the Marie Germain event functioned as the initial catalyzer for his shift away from the man/woman template, it is safe to assume that he sought to underpin the cogency of his move by citing Ambroise Paré's averment in *Des Monstres et Prodiges* that Pliny the Elder (23/24—9 CE) mentions a case in which "une fille devint garçon" (a girl becomes a boy) (Paré, 1971, p. 30; see Gaius Plinius Secundus, *Naturalis historia*, VII, 4).

38. Given Montaigne's often references to Nature's exuberance of forms, it would have been philosophically pointless to suggest finite alternatives to the binomial distribution of the sexes (or to the regnant taxology of their combinatories: male/female, male/male and female/female). Montaigne thus sufficed himself, at first, with acknowledging the commonsensical, purportedly self-evident approach of sexual difference. His *pro forma* acceptance of the binomial sexual pattern, however, was performed in full awareness of its irremediable inadequacy. As hinted in "Au lecteur," the societal order on which the binding public reverence hinges presupposes assuming the man/woman hiatus, whose pervasive validity prevented Montaigne from portraying himself as he would have liked to: "entire and fully naked." Hindered, under these circumstances, to attain transparency in his self-portrayal as a male-sexed writer, Montaigne deployed his own writing as an oblique means for liberating himself from sexual binarity as the fountainhead of the behavioral code tabooing nudity from the view of the *opposite* sex. In his bid against this constriction, Montaigne drew on his central concept of "human form" to radically de-categorize the individual's sexuality. Given his apprehensions to articulate publicly and unequivocally his design to dismantle the man/woman scheme inherited from millennia of history, Montaigne opted for partially disguising his critical intent. He

thus toned down his unheard-of challenge to propound a non-disjunctive grasp of the individual's sexuality almost two and a half centuries prior to Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) evolution-backed ascertainment that "Every man & woman is hermaphrodite […]" (Darwin, 1987, p. 384 [Notebook D (1838), No. 162]).

39. Montaigne's Ockhamist-inspired aperçus concerning the impossibility of reducing the sexed individual to a categorial pattern (see Friedrich, 1967, p. 126; Todorov, 2001, p. 21) preluded his path toward questioning the commonplace distinction between male/female love and male-male friendship, an issue that marked his life and thought following his early encounter with the prematurely deceased Étienne de La Boétie.[104] Montaigne's design to de-categorize the individual's sexuality on account of its uniqueness accorded well with the Renaissance taste for the uncommon, eccentric, or deviant that had been thematized by the medical literature, which converged in Ambroise Paré's documentation of unwonted natural phenomena.[105] Moreover, Montaigne's approach of sexual diversity was affine with the worldview subtending the proliferation of *cabinets de curiosités*, in which natural instances were showcased that defied the expected criteria of what life can bring about.[106] Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent that Montaigne's passage positing a unique sexual mold and its eventual diversification, far from being a flow of words "impetuous and harmful" (III, 5, 897),[107] actually constituted the *clef de voûte* of his sexual thought. His attentiveness to the individualized differentiations, on which the variability of sexual forms rely,[108] foreshadowed the modern grasp of sexuality within evolution

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[104] As regards the philosophical significance of the friendship between Montaigne and La Boétie, see: Bauer, 2024.

[105] For an analysis of Paré's indebtedness to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period as regards his conception of sexuality, see: Thomasset, 2023.

[106] On the existence of a "cabinet de curiosités" in Montaigne's library containing "americana," see: I, 31, 208; Cocula & Legros, 2011. p. 113.

[107] "impetueux […] et nuisible"

[108] Montaigne advanced the notion of a common sexual *moule* as part of elaborations that were purportedly not intended to be taken seriously. While his strategy of ironic self-disavowal may have proved useful to avoid being targeted by censorship, it certainly did not contribute to the adequate reception and assessment of his sexual thought. It is thus not surprising that two recent scholarly

theory as a non-essentialist naturalism (see Bauer, 2012). Although Montaigne was generally disinclined to identify himself with most of the schools of thought that had shaped the Renaissance intellectual landscape, he signally acknowledged being one of the naturalists of his age.

40. Indeed, in a passage of "De la physionomie" (Of physiognomy), Montaigne declared: "We *naturalists* judge that the honor of invention is greater and incomparably preferable to the honor of quotation" (III, 12, 1056; emphasis added).[109] Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), whose intellectual curiosity has been commended for being "pure, personal, and delightfully obsessive" (Isaacson, 2018, p. 2), effectively anticipated by almost a century Montaigne's praise of creativity (see Pedretti, 1977, vol. I, p. 110), when declaring that he would not take "parole" but "sperietia" as the "maestra" that he quotes in all occasions (Leonardo, 1970, p. 14).[110] Deploying an empirical outlook that was not unlike that of the Tuscan master, Montaigne approached sexual difference primarily on the basis of his own observations that he sought to underpin with the aid of the then budding science of modern anatomy. Given his interests in these areas, Montaigne felt compelled to critically confront the sexual teachings upheld by Church and State. In a sense, he was particularly apt to fulfil the task due to the theological expertise he had attained as translator of the compendious *Liber creaturarum* (1434-1436)[111] by early fifteenth-century Catalan philosopher

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pieces on Montaigne's understanding of "sexualité" and "sexe," despite being highly informative and witty, overlook the decisive systemic role played by the notion of a unique *moule* of the sexes in his reconceptualization of sexual difference (see Legros, 2018, pp. 1721-1727; Legros, 2006, pp. 87-92).

[109] "Nous autres naturalistes estimons qu'il y aie grande et incomparable preferance de l'honneur de l'invention à l'honneur de l'allegation"

[110] The immediate context in which the cited concepts appear reads: "diranno che per non avere io lettere non potere bien dire quello, di che voglio trattare or no sano questi che le mie cose son piu da esser tratte dalla sperietia, che d'altra parola, la quale fu maestra di chi beni scrissi e cosi per maestra la in tutti casi allegherò." / "They will say that I, having no literary skill, cannot properly express that which I desire to treat of, but they do not know that my subjects are to be dealt with by experience rather than by words; and [experience] has been the mistress of those who write well. And so, as mistress, I will cite her in all cases." (Leonardo, 1970, p. 14; see Leonardo, 2008, p. 4).

[111] The treatise eventually became better known as *Theologia naturalis* (see Sebond, 2022a). For the translation of this work by Montaigne, see Sebond, 2022b.

and theologian Raymond Sebond. Despite his personal disinterest in strictly theological matters, Montaigne translated the book upon the request of his elderly father, and consequently became thoroughly cognizant of the biblical and ecclesiastic views on the dichotomous separation of the sexes that he intended to supersede. Against this backdrop, Montaigne sought to self-portray himself in a way that would suffice his radical standards of transparency that ran counter the preoccupations of the societal milieu of his birth. Rebuffing the comforts of widely shared thoughtless doxas, Montaigne argued that the writerly self-disclosure he intended could only be attainable if the individual's sexuality is viewed as a unique reflectance of the universal "human form." Past the Edenic topos of sexual shame, Montaigne was therewith setting the theoretical stage for coping with the sexual misery provoked by the self-apotheoses of masculinism that still haunt the Western mind.

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