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Conclusion

A great performance of one of Shakespeare's tragedies provokes a strong emotional involvement. We are forcefully reminded of the fragility of our conventional, comfortable ways of living and of the abysses of hatred and horror which lie beneath. By comparison a careful reading of one of Montaigne's *essais* excites the brain more than the emotions, as we follow the axioms and counterexamples, as Montaigne overlays arguments to the point where we can accept neither side of a contradiction. And yet Montaigne incorporates appalling descriptions of tortures and suicides and when they are read carefully Shakespeare's words prompt new worlds of reflection.

Montaigne's greatest chapters demand to be read slowly in relatively short sequences of fragments. Such a reading enables us to appreciate the force and originality of his logical combinations, to respond to his intarsia of styles. Furthermore it recognizes that each reading of Montaigne will be different, that an analysis which seeks to fix the flux of his responses differentiated with time is bound to fail. Shakespeare's thought operates both in dizzying metaphorical poetry and by enforcing questions and comparisons. Why is this speaker saying this? How are his words different from others'? What does the plot tell us about the consequences of their different views?

One of Montaigne's great achievements is to present us with a character whom everybody wishes to recognize as a friend but who represents changing reactions to events and ideas. He not only depicts passage and process but also persuades and denounces, offers models to others and questions their and his own conclusions. The *Essais* are not simply moral teaching; rather the spirit of reflective self-improvement animates Montaigne's juxtaposing of moral axioms and exemplary stories, and the questions and counterinstances his reflection offers to both. While Shakespeare depicts changeability of response in Hamlet and bewildering moment to moment discontinuities in King Lear, he arouses thought in his audience by counterposing different (and differently valued) viewpoints. The quotations Montaigne culls from his reading provide a similar range of positions to test out.

In the central chapters of this book I have suggested that rhetoric and dialectic offer us Renaissance ways of understanding Montaigne's successive responses to an axiom and Shakespeare's methods of constructing speeches. That procedures for writing should teach you how to read is a corollary of the reciprocity between reading and writing in humanist school practice. Montaigne's thought is driven by his reaction to axioms, usually involving a

story (which can stand in different relations to the axiom), support for the idea through various topics or exploration of its meaning, grammatically, through effects and consequences and using amplification. His most characteristic further moves are various expressions of opposition, the turn to the self, in which he reflects on whether the conclusion stated truthfully represents his own experience, and comparison. Some of his most innovative logical moves result from consideration of the relationship between a part or a singular event and the whole context of the time.

Shakespeare constructs many of his characters' speeches by applying the resources of *copia* (including descriptive detail, circumstances, effects and examples) to a simple outline. One character is made to reflect on statements made by another typically by considering consequences, evidence and causes, and especially the motives of the person speaking and the expected response of the on-stage audience. As in Montaigne, many speeches express opposition to a previously expressed idea, including distinctions of senses, contraries and investigations of effects.

There is nothing in Shakespeare's use of his reading to compare with Montaigne's use of quotations to generalize and clarify his own experience (e.g., in *De l'exercitation*, II, 6), to move an argument on (e.g., in *Que philosopher*, I, 20 and *De la vanité*, III, 9) or to formulate a position in such a way that he realizes that he needs to oppose it (e.g., in *De la vanité*). The way in which he quotes Latin poetry to express a heightened emotional state in himself (e.g., in *De l'amitié*, I, 28) might be considered as an equivalent for Shakespeare's imitation of earlier poetry at particularly intense moments (e.g., his use of Seneca in *Richard III*) but more likely it reveals a difference between the two writers. Shakespeare's most intensely emotional moments, at least in the later works, more usually occur when he is writing free of his sources, whereas Montaigne's usually rely on retelling a disturbing story or savouring a resonant passage of Latin poetry. The very occasional comments on the effectiveness of poetry in Shakespeare's plays have nothing like the force of Montaigne's observations on Virgil or his descriptions of the growth of his poetic taste in *Du jeune Caton* (I, 37). Montaigne became a great writer through making himself a great reader.

The method of Montaigne's ethical explorations is unusual for a moral philosopher but normal for a Renaissance reader. He gathers axioms, stories and model figures from his reading and compares them both with each other (since they often contradict each other) and with his own experience. By including different conclusions, and by embracing some of

them as his own view at different times, he exemplifies the way practical moral judgement varies according to circumstance. Stories and character descriptions, especially the descriptions of Socrates and Epaminondas, convey his ethical approach more comprehensively and more effectively than axioms. Montaigne denies that he aims at moral teaching but he allows that his aim in writing is to present (one could add, to justify and promote) his *mœurs* (habits and ethical preferences) to an audience.

Montaigne's ethical innovations are founded on a determination to examine what other people ignore, for reasons of custom or social pressure. So he accepts the needs and pleasures of the body. He analyses men's demands on women in the light of his understanding of sexuality. He acknowledges what he owes to his appearance, his social position and plain good luck. He insists on thinking about death, which other people try to ignore, until he realizes that death is only a part of life and that nature will prepare him (and everyone else) for that, just as she prepares them for birth and for eating. While acknowledging and regretting his faults he takes the view that he lives well, in a human way.

Early in the 1570s, not long after taking possession of his house, Montaigne inscribed a set of Latin and Greek moral axioms, largely representing Stoic and Sceptical philosophy, but including some Biblical proverbs, on the beams of his library.¹ For the most part Montaigne uses proverbs as he uses other quotations.² In some chapters they are among the more important intellectual stimuli. In I, 9, the proverb that the liar needs a good memory (Erasmus, *Adagia*, II, 3, 74) serves as the hinge connecting two of the main topics of the essay. In III, 2, questioning the meaning of the common saying (*ce qu'on dit*) that repentance follows immediately upon vice helps Montaigne to develop his critical inquiry into the nature of repentance. But proverbs seem especially important, and implicit references to Erasmus's *Adagia* are especially common, in the final chapters. The close of *De la vanité* (III, 9) focuses on Know thyself (*Adagia*, I, 6, 95) and several associated proverbs. The main idea of *Des boyteux* (III, 11) depends on a proverb about lame women and Erasmus's comments on it in *Adagia*, II, 9, 49. *De l'expérience* (III, 13) begins by examining the proverb 'as like as two eggs' and uses a number of other proverbs as it proceeds. Where Shakespeare uses proverbs to open arguments, to decorate his texts, to generalize and to describe character throughout his career, Montaigne makes much greater use of them in his final chapters in parallel with his movement away from learning and philosophy and towards an appreciation of the wisdom of ordinary people.

The differences in genre and structure between Montaigne and Shakespeare paradoxically serve to highlight similarities in their approach. Montaigne's *Essais* are built around contrasts between maxims and stories and among different maxims. An idea is stated and then measured against narratives, some of them supporting it, others questioning it. Contrasting axioms are subjected to the same type of questioning and testing against Montaigne's sense of his own experience. The local organization of a sequence results from a logical worrying over the connections and contrasts between axioms (and between axioms and narratives), often in turn complicated by new counterexamples, new quotations and new attempts to trace a path among the conflicting ideas. Where Montaigne's narratives serve mainly to provoke, confirm or question lessons phrased as axioms, Shakespeare as a dramatist (rather than the creator of a new learned genre) is obliged to use his narrative sources as the main cohesive and forward-driving structure of his works. But he characteristically adapts his sources so as to introduce parallels and comparisons between the narratives of different characters and he gives them maxims to express, to worry over and to compare with their experiences. The narrative and the histories of the different characters invite the audience to compare the truthfulness and the implications of the axioms spoken by the different characters. Using similar reading, and rethinking about their ideas with similar logical and rhetorical techniques, Montaigne and Shakespeare both offer and develop different perspectives on events with the aim of providing the playgoer and the reader with food to think with.

Sometimes they seem to be working out of the same material but taking it in different directions. In other ethical and political areas comparisons show that their approach and their conclusions are much further apart. Shakespeare's plays demonstrate a fascination with the machinations of practical politics on the basis of a reading of history and of participating in the governance of his company but Montaigne had considerable personal experience of city politics, of the friendship of princes and of negotiations about great affairs of state. In *De l'utile et de l'honneste* (III, 1) he recognizes that princes may sometimes need to break their word or to act deceitfully, because of their responsibility for their states, but insists that he himself would be unwilling to do this, and that he would think badly of any prince who acted in this way without great regret. Personal experience of high politics has reinforced his conviction that honourable behaviour is personally preferable (and almost always politically more effective). In *De mesnager sa*

volonté (III, 10), in which he gives his most detailed account of his period as Mayor of Bordeaux, he insists on the public man's need of personal time and on the importance of acknowledging duties to oneself alongside duties to others. Shakespeare's close observation of the principles and consequences of political manoeuvring takes account of the need to build alliances (in the fall of Humphrey Duke of Gloucester) and of the benefits of manipulating public opinion (in Henry IV and Prince Hal) but it also depicts the personal costs of political behaviour (e.g., in Clarence in *Richard III* and in the portrayal of the King in *Henry IV part two*). In different ways Hotspur and Falstaff force us to question the basis of aristocratic honour (which Montaigne is relatively comfortable in preferring to utility). Montaigne's position within the state enables him to experience and reject a division of loyalties (and thus resemble Shakespeare's imagination of what political activity feels like for the politician), but perhaps limits his possibility of questioning the bases for his line of conduct. Shakespeare's portrayal of a wider range of points of view extends the possible arguments he can entertain. In the subject of politics it seems that Montaigne can explore deeply the complexity of an individual response, whereas Shakespeare can contrast a wide range of points of view of different political figures. Here each of them takes on the usual advantages of the other.

On other subjects the differences between the two are more striking than the similarities. Shakespeare presents the horror at the heart of human existence and family life in an altogether less reassuring way than Montaigne. Where Montaigne's bitter attacks on human pretension generally have a positive purpose, to instil humility, to reinstate faith and to justify Sebond, *King Lear* presents agony as part of human life from the moment of birth. Where Montaigne hopes that the kindness of a father will encourage a reciprocal love and consideration from his children, Shakespeare depicts the destructive resentments which family closeness and the misapprehensions of love promote. Montaigne's horror stories (largely involving the conquistadores and the history of the Turks) show man's inhumanity, which he depicts as essentially avoidable, as aberrations and reproaches to the hypocritical self-esteem of the European aristocracy. His narratives of the moral decay caused by the French wars of religion are framed as a conservative attack on the folly of attempting religious or political change. Where Montaigne generally contains his horror narratives as part of a moral critique intended to improve the Renaissance man, Shakespeare can present misery as at the heart of all human experience.

Their difference in social position and audience causes a large disparity between their views of the relationship between rulers and people. In his late phase Montaigne expresses his admiration for the behaviour of ordinary people, suggesting that their attitudes to death and misfortune should be regarded as a model for their betters. He wants to learn from the people but he remains quite firmly within the world of the educated landed gentry as his audience and as the people whose attitudes he wishes to change. Shakespeare by contrast almost always adds to his narratives scenes reflecting the reactions and the agency of the non-aristocratic population. The actions of the Old Man and the Servant in *King Lear* provide both models of selfless and caring interventions and reproaches to the responses of the aristocratic families. So far there is a similarity, but Shakespeare also insists on the words and views of the socially marginalized. The gravediggers provide Hamlet with ideas to reflect on and mirror his changed outlook without sharing his disavowal of the consequences of his actions. Falstaff and Eastcheap question the English élite's assumptions about moral behaviour. Caliban, who can acknowledge his faults, nevertheless shows us what the unthinking oppressiveness of European intellectual superiority feels like from beneath. If Montaigne's ethical innovation was to understand the changeability and failings of the individual, that is to say to recognize without despair both human failings and the inextricable human vanity with which they are covered over, then Shakespeare's was to revalue the view from below and insist on the social obligation to compassionate action even in the light of a recognition of the horrors within human existence. The messages we take from Shakespeare and Montaigne reflect our own preoccupations. Using their humanist rhetorical and logical inheritance (derived from Agricola and Erasmus) they refashion elements from their own reading in classical literature to provide their audiences with arguments and narratives to think with, and with models of how thinking might develop.

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