MONTAIGNE'S NOTION OF WOMEN: REALITY AND PREJUDICE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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When Michel de Montaigne in his very first *Essay* compares the "weaker natures" of women to those of "children and the common herd,"[1] it is but the first of many such statements in the *Essays* which offend present day feminist sensibilities. There, in a seemingly cavalier way, the essayist relegates women to the lower of the "two human races" spoken of by his friend Marie de Gournay.[2] To a twentieth century reader such views are unexpected from a sixteenth century moralist and enlightened humanist said to be "unprejudiced."[3] They impel us to examine the origins and bases for Montaigne's opinions of women.

That women were a favorite theme (or butt) of Montaigne's pen can be seen by comparing the subject of women (*femmes*) with others in the "Table des Matieres" of Eva Marcu's *Repertoire des Idees de Montaigne*. Of the 160 items indexed, "*Femmes*" occupies twenty pages; only "*Moi*" (118 pages) "*Homme*," "*Religion*," "*Mort*" and six other topics receive more of his attention.[4] Yet in all that discussion, Montaigne can say little good about women.[5]

No doubt, Montaigne's upbringing, his experiences of intimacy with women, and the times in which he lived influenced his opinions of the opposite sex. He tells us that

> . . . while I was nursing and before the first loosening of my tongue, he [his father] put me in the care of a German . . . wholly ignorant of our language and very well versed in Latin. This man . . . had me constantly in his hands.[6]

He and his mother would have been unable to develop the mother-child relationship we think necessary for the psyche for he was "sent . . . from the cradle to be brought up in a poor village of his [father's], and [he] kept me there as long as I was nursing, . . ."[7] At six, he was sent to the College of Guyenne in Bordeaux where he would remain for the next seven years. At thirteen he had finished the twelve-year course of study and left the school. Little information is available on his life from thirteen to twenty-one or so, but Donald M. Frame suggests that part of that time may have been spent in an academy for young nobles or possibly in reading law.[8] Thus he spent almost all of his childhood and youth in the company of men, rarely associating with women, even his own mother and sisters.[9] Such an environment, probably typical for a noble youth, could have engendered little understanding of and warmth for the opposite sex.

There has been a good deal of speculation about his relationship with his mother who is noticeably absent from his *Essays*. According to Frame, he mentions her only twice, and one of those times just to relate that his brothers and sisters had the same mother. The other, only a bit warmer, concerned the fact that no one was to speak other than Latin to him, "even his mother or father." Frame points out, however, that it is typical of Montaigne not to mention by name people who were still living. His father, about whom he wrote warmly, was dead by the time he began to write seriously; his mother survived Montaigne by several years.[10]

What little is known about Antoinette de Louppes, Montaigne's mother, has been derived from legal documents, which, according to Frame, show her to be a "strong-minded, capable woman . . . bitter" over the financial arrangements made for her by her husband in his will and overseeing the control of the estate pass to her son "to whom property was a pleasant accident." The house where she had lived for forty years was legally her son's, and in her later years she moved from the chateau altogether.[11] Montaigne may be summarizing his relationship with his mother in "Affection of Fathers" when he discusses unreasonable and unfair women and allows that such women be given "the administration of affairs [of an estate] until their children are. . . of legal age to take over on their own. But the father has brought them up badly if he cannot hope that at that age they will have more wisdom and ability than his wife, seeing the ordinary weakness of the sex."[12]

From the above emerges a portrait of a mother-son relationship that from its very beginning was remote and cold, even unnatural by today's standards. This relationship developed later in life into one of bitterness for them both. There can have been little cause for warmth on either side: mother and son were never close. Pierre Eyquemm's second will, which gave control of the estate to Michel, must surely have caused further estrangement. Montaigne's relationship with his mother almost certainly contributed to his negative views of women.

Montaigne's marriage and choice of wife followed the Renaissance pattern of marriage as an institution whose purposes were procreation, avoidance of sin, and "mutual aid and comfort." It was the institution for which women were born and bred, but for men it was a necessary encumbrance.[13] Montaigne married Francoise de la Chassaigne in 1565, when she was twenty and he was thirty-three. Of his marriage he said,

> Of my own choice I would have avoided marrying Wisdom herself . . . . But say what we will, the custom and practice of life bears us along . . . .[14] . . . . . We do not marry for ourselves, whatever we say; we

marry just as much or more for posterity, for our family.[15]

So he did not marry for love, although he says when he was once stricken with grief over his friend, La Boetie, he made himself fall in love. For Montaigne, a good marriage should be based on friendship, not on love.[16]

Frame gives us the few details known about Francoise de La Chassaigne. She came from a prominent Catholic family of Bordeaux. Her father was Joseph, Lord of Pressac, a councillor in the Bordeaux Parlement for twenty-five years. She was reported to have been both beautiful and a good hostess. She was evidently good at running a household although she was not as careful with money as Montaigne would have liked. Some scholars have suggested that Madame de Montaigne may have committed adultery with her husband's brother, Arnaud, Lord of Sainte-Martin. The source for this conjecture is a document (May 1569) which acknowledged the return of a chain found by Montaigne in his wife's jewelry box. The chain may have belonged to de Sainte-Martin, who had died around 1568. Montaigne's mother claimed the chain when it was found, and this document declared that the chain had been returned to her. Frame gives little credence to this conjecture of infidelity, but he does not totally rule out the possibility.[17] Whether there was anything in Montaigne's marriage that might contribute in any special way to Montaigne's antifeminist views is difficult to say, unless of course his wife was in fact unfaithful. Otherwise, Madame de Montaigne must have fulfilled her husband's expectations of a wife satisfactorily: ". . .I require of a married woman, above all other virtues, the virtues of a good housewife."[18] He says of his marriage:

> . . . . I did not really bid myself to it, I was led to it, and borne by extraneous circumstances. . . . And I was borne to it certainly more ill-prepared and contrary than I am now after having tried it. And, licentious as I am thought to be, I have in truth observed the laws of marriage more strictly than I had either promised or expected.[19]

It is almost certain that he came to the marriage with typical Renaissance notions about women and marriage, and for the most part Madame de Montaigne confirmed them.

According to Joan Kelly in *Women, History & Theory*, the Renaissance notion of women was not as liberal as past historians have assumed. Kelly argues that the Renaissance women had lost ground over her sisters of the Middle Ages and had become merely "an aesthetic object: decorous, chaste, and doubly dependent--on her husband as well as the prince."[20] Montaigne reveals something of the age's notion of women when he says in "Of Three Kinds of

Association," "The world has nothing more beautiful; it is for them to do honor to the arts and to decorate decoration. What do they need but to live beloved and honored?"[21]

Medieval society had allowed women two areas of privilege which were increasingly being denied to Renaissance women. First, women had been able to inherit and administer feudal property.[22] Montaigne recognized this right when he commented in the past tense, "As women who succeeded to peerages, in spite of their sex, had the right to attend and deliberate in cases pertaining to the jurisdiction of peers. . . ."[23] Women were literally "lords" of the manor. Second, the Middle Ages had encouraged the female dominated tradition of courtly love which permitted women to set the standard for the manners and mores of the time, resulting in a more positive view of women and gaining for them substantial influence.[24]

With the development of the modern state, however, the nobility as a whole suffered a loss of power. The patriarchal family became the nobility's source of strength, as well as the state's "instrument of social control."[25] As a result, the noblewoman was subordinated to the aim of the patrimony and of the state. She lost both her power and her influence. The age had now become one in which men were setting society's standards.[26]

The Renaissance notion of women retained the repressive traditions of the Middle Ages. These traditions were grounded both in the Bible and the dictums of the Church as well as in custom and literature. In addition to these persistent traditions from the Medieval period was Renaissance man's fascination with classical literature which frequently belittled women. Together, these conditions left a long trail of oppression and of vituperation of women.[27]

The *querelle des femmes*, another factor which affected the Renaissance view of women, may have influenced Montaigne. Christine de Pisan began the *querelle* in 1399, in response to Jean de Meung's antifeminist portion of *The Romance of the Rose*, but the quarrel reached its peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The debate was a literary one with defenders and defamers making charges and countercharges. Ruth Kelso wonders why writers of this period so strongly focused on the differences between men and women and conjectures that the Renaissance itself was the cause since it renewed emphasis on Greek and Roman thought and urged education for both men and women. As women became more interested in learning and education, they inspired "suspicion and antagonism." Although there were both male and female defenders of women, prevailing opinion fell on the side of the detractors.[28]

It was in this milieu that Montaigne began writing in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, incorporating his own notions of women into his essays. Montaigne begins his diatribe on women in his first *Essay* as noted above.

Worse remarks are to come: women are incapable of friendship because their "souls are not firm enough;"[29] jealously seizes these poor, weak and unresisting souls . . . and drags them about and tyrannizes over them;"[30] and "their very essence is so steeped in suspicion, vanity and curiosity. . . ."[31] Yet Montaigne does not consider females evil, a common charge of other Renaissance vilifiers, along with cowardice, timidity, greed, avarice, vindictiveness, licentiousness, etc.[32] While these themes appeared from various sources, the depiction of women as evil incarnate seems to have the special province of the Church. The apocryphal book, Ecclesiasticus (42:14) provided at least one source for this view: "Better the wickedness of a man than a pleasant-dealing woman."[33]

The concept of women's sexuality as sinful, which persisted into the Renaissance, had its basis in the writings of the early church fathers. The importance of chastity, the idea that sexual desire was evil, marriage without passion as a "compromise" between sexuality and celibacy and the notion that

> . . . woman was from first to last the principal tool of man's undoing," were all values treasured by the Church. They would keep man pure for his ultimate destiny, his heavenly union.[34]

While Montaigne supports the theological and philosophical concept of restrained passion in marriage, he is a most ardent defender of women's sexuality. Many sympathetic statements occur in "On Some Verses of Virgil": "There is no passion more pressing than this, which we want them alone to be able to resist, not simply as a vice. . ., but as an abomination and execration; . . . and meanwhile we give in to it without blame or reproach." He tells us that "We train them from childhood to the ways of love," and "want them to be healthy, vigorous, plump, well-nourished, and chaste at the same time," but "we are children compared to them in this knowledge."[35] He equates men and women when he says that both are "capable of a thousand corruptions more harmful and unnatural than lasciviousness." To him the demand for chastity of women if met, gives women "valor and virtue" greater than any man's.[36]

As for cuckoldry, Montaigne simply admonishes men to stop concerning themselves about keeping their wives' virtues purer than their own. Besides, he wrote, "Each one of you has made someone a cuckold." In fact, it happens so often it should soon become a "custom."[37]

Montaigne's acceptance of the natural sexuality of women and his understanding of human desire stood in opposition to the Church's teachings and the contemporary demand for women's chastity. His comments on cuckoldry acknowledged infidelity among those of his class on the part of both sexes. In this attitude Montaigne may have been more Medieval than Renaissance.

Paradoxically, Montaigne says that according to the laws of nature, the role of women is to "suffer, obey and consent," not to "will and desire."[38]

Montaigne's view of the subordinate nature of women and of the "authority of husbands over wives"[39] was certainly the standard for sixteenth century society. Robert Mandrou quotes Etienne Pasquier, "'By natural law, a wife must bow to her husband's will,'" a concept that was grounded in Roman law.[40] Of course, St. Paul's dictum that "At the head of every man is Christ and the head of every woman is the man" formed the theological basis for this view.[41] Calvinists were admonished to moderate their authority over their wives and refrain from beating them. Beating, it seems, was a common means of controlling a troublesome and willful wife.

Marriage was a pragmatic institution both in Montaigne's opinion and that of his age. It provided a means to avoid sin and to produce legitimate heirs for the estate. It gave to the husband a manager of his household and a caretaker for his children. Companionship was its highest emotional aim: "A good marriage, if such there be, rejects the company and conditions of love. It tries to reproduce those of friendship."[42] However, Montaigne also comments that if marriage is "founded well" and "taken rightly there is no finer relationship in our society."[43]

For a woman, marriage was virtually her only vocation: either she married a husband or she went into a convent. All her training went toward preparing her to be a wife, the only role for which she had capacity.[44] Prevailing Renaissance attitudes held that women had little reasoning ability and hence were not capable of intellectual pursuits.[45] Montaigne comments that the emptier a mind, like those of "children, common people, women and sick people," the more susceptible it is to "belief."[46] The age conceded that women had "meditative powers," but had little need of education.[47] Of course, there were women who defied this convention, especially among those of the highest levels of society.

Montaigne considered learning a dangerous thing "if it is in a weak hand that does not know to use it--. . . which is why neither we nor theology require much learning for women."[48] He complains of ladies who talk of learned matters, "The learning that could not reach their minds remains on their tongue," when it would serve them better to "do honor to the arts and to decorate decoration." He fears that the men who advise women to study "rhetoric, astrology, logic and similar drugs" are simply trying to "gain mastery over them." If, however, these women insist on having "a share in book learning," then poetry is suitable for them as is that part of philosophy which is "useful for life."[49]

When Montaigne dedicates the essay "Of the Education of Children" to Madame Diane de Foix, he is making his views a present to "the little man who

threatens soon to come out so bravely . . .(you are too noble-spirited to begin otherwise than with a male)." [50] His educational scheme was only for boys; education for girls was another matter. The studies suitable for young girls of the noble class were those concerning religion and morals in sacred and classical literature. The most liberal pedogogues-- Vives, Bruni, Hyrde--might allow history, oratory, and poetry to supplement this moral training, but even they omitted arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and rhetoric.[51]

There were of course notable examples of learned women in the sixteenth century. They knew and studied religious and classical literature in Latin and even in Greek. Several women were fluent in modern languages. What writing these women did was for the most part limited to translation and "devotional literature." Marguerite de Navarre, sister of Francis I and mother of Jeanne, understood theology and wrote a collection of tales known as *Heptameron*.[52]

Montaigne used Marguerite's tale about the devotion her brother showed by going into a church for prayers on his way to and from an assignation as a proof that "women are hardly fit to treat theological matters."[53] This story gave Montaigne an opportunity to comment on the involvement of women in Protestantism. Marguerite and her Huguenot daughter played an important role in the beginnings of the French Reformation.

Montaigne omits commentary on the political and economic status of women in the sixteenth century with two exceptions. He mentions Plato's welcoming women to "the fellowship of all studies, exercises, functions, warlike and peaceful occupations . . . ."[54] The essayist also comments that mothers should not be financially dependent on their children. For the most part, the involvement of women of the noble class in France in either its politics or economic life was at best only indirect. Renaissance writers almost universally abhorred women running affairs of state. John Knox's *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) states the age's view with a vengeance. All laws, natural, divine, and human favored men for these duties, and only unusual circumstance or unusual qualities would permit women to rule.[55] Whatever meager political power French women had came through influence; and for some women that was a powerful tool, as in the case of Catherine de Medicis.

Noblewomen in the Renaissance had little economic independence, for daughters were wards of their fathers; once married, wives and their dowries came under their husband's control. Only if widowed and with no male family members above the age of majority could women manage an estate or handle money matters. Montaigne wished for a son-in-law "in whose hands I could deposit full sovereignty over the management and use of my possessions, that he might do with them as I do, and enjoy my present profits in my place."[56]

Montaigne's contradictory views of women run from the misogynist to the feminist. Some of the most offensive have been noted, as well as some of the more understanding, especially in regard to women's sexual natures and the demands men make for their chastity. Other statements carry his defense of women ever further. In "Of Three Good Women" he says, "They don't come by the dozen . . . especially in the duties of marriage; for that is a bargain full of so many thorny circumstances that it is hard for a woman's will to maintain itself whole in it for long."[57] He condemns the treachery of men who make vows they will not keep to women to gain their favors and points out that this causes them to "rally and fall back on themselves" or to be as men are and "play their part in the farce."[58] He says men "are in almost all things, unjust judges of their [women's] actions."[59] Certainly these statements could place him among the ranks of modern day feminists.

Montaigne scholars observe that his most feminist statements come from the writings of his more mature years and are to be found among the "B"- and "C" -periods of his writings. They therefore conclude that with maturity he became more sympathetic toward women and their situation.[60]

In view of these conclusions, it is interesting to note that it was in early 1588, when the writings of the "C"-period began, that Montaigne met Marie de Gournay, an ardent feminist who later published two essays on women's rights. In one on those, *The Equality of Men and Women*, she claimed that lack of education and opportunity accounted for the differences in the accomplishments of men and women.[61] Although Frame, in his *Biography*, does not attribute to Montaigne the devotion to Marie that other authors do, the two did visit and correspond until his death.[62] It would seem likely that she influenced his thinking about women and their place in society.[63] One might also speculate that the *querelle des femmes* contributed to his changing attitude toward women. Perhaps if he had not given credence to the debate before he met de Gournay, she would have made him aware of it after they met.

Abraham Keller argues that Montaigne's feminism was "incomplete" because his defense of women was only in the matter of sexual inequality. However, claims Keller, when Montaigne handwrites the "C" addition of the following passage in his copy of the 1588 edition, he demonstrates that he is aware of this incompleteness and is recommending a "full and proper feminism:"[64]

> . . .--I say that males and females are cast in the same mold; except for education and custom, the difference is not great. Plato invites both without discrimination to the fellowship of all studies, exercises, functions, warlike and peaceful occupations, in his commonwealth. And the philosopher

> Antisthenes eliminated any distinction between their virtue and ours. It is much easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other. It is the old saying: The pot calls the kettle black.[65]

From the perspective of the twentieth century, many of Montaigne's notions of women seem astonishingly misogynist for an important and "unprejudiced" man of letters, but viewed in the context of the sixteenth century they lose some of their sting. He himself was an amalgamation of his time and his upbringing. Most of the women he knew either were not or could not be learned, and their oppression must have made them shrewish--not a picture of a delightful companion. It is even possible that some of his remarks may have been meant to shock and awaken male sensibilities in transition like his own. He may even have been entering the fray of the *querelle des femmes*. Other barbs may have been no more than a reaction to a momentary vexation. What does finally come through is that Montaigne was at least aware of the strictures placed on women during this time and of the limited spheres of their lives:

> Women are not wrong at all when they reject the rules of life that have been introduced into the world, inasmuch as it is the men who have made these without them. There is naturally strife and wrangling between them and us: the closest communion we have with them is still tumultuous and tempestuous.[66]

NOTES

[1]Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 4.

[2]Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), p. 218.

[3]See J. M. Cohen, Introduction to *Essays*, by Michel de Montaigne (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 10, and the quotation from Sainte-Beuve (p. 316) in Donald M. Frame, *Montaigne, a Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), p. 318.

[4](Geneva: Librarie Droz, 1965).

[5]A word of caution concerning Montaigne's views: Barbara Bowen in *The Age of Bluff: Paradox & Ambiguity in Rabelais & Montaigne* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972) discusses the use of a literary technique in French Renaissance literature which she calls "bluff." In the use of this technique the author's aim is to "shock" or "disconcert" the reader. She maintains that many of Montaigne's statements, if taken literally, are "simply

not true" and that there is strong evidence that much of his writing is done "tongue in cheek," pp. 6, 115, 123.

[6]Montaigne, "Of the Education of Children" (I:26), p. 128.

[7]Ibid., "Of Experience" (III:13), p. 844.

[8]Frame, pp. 42-43.

[9]Joan Kelly, in the essay "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Women, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), notes that women suffered a loss of influence during the Renaissance. The lack of involvement Montaigne's mother had in his urbringing is a case in point.

[10]Frame, p. 16.

[11]Ibid., pp. 26-27.

[12]Ibid., "Of the Affection of Fathers for their Children" (II:8), p. 288.

[13]Kelso, pp. 78-79.

[14]Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil" (III:5), p. 648.

[15]Ibid., p. 645.

[16]Barbara C. Bowen in "Montaigne's Anti-*Phaedrus*: Sur des Vers de Virgile' (*Essai*, III, v)," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 5 (1975): 107-21, points out that for Montaigne, "love is only physical."

[17]Frame, pp. 85-102.

[18]Montaigne, "Of Vanity" (III:9), p. 745.

[19]Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil" (III:5), p. 648.

[20]Kelly, p. 47.

[21]Montaigne, "Of Three Kinds of Associations" (III:3), p. 624.

[22]Kelly, p. 27.

[23]Montaigne, "Of Not Communicating One's Glory" (I:41), p. 188.

[24]Maurice Valency, *In Praise of Love: An Introduction to the Love-Poetry of the Renaissance*, (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 64.

[25]Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Women* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 87.

[26]Kelly, pp. 46-47.

[27]For more in-depth discussions of the conditions which influenced the status of women of the sixteenth century, see Cecile Insdorf, *Montaigne and Feminism*, North Carolina Studies in Languages and Literatures, no. 194 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), pp. 19-40, and Valency, pp. 59-85.

[28]Kelso, pp. 5-37.

[29]Montaigne, "Of Friendship" (I:28), p. 138.

[30]Ibid., "On Some Verses of Virgil" (III:5), p. 658.

[31]Ibid., pp. 662-63.

[32]Kelso, pp. 11-12.

[33]Maclean, p. 15.

[34]Valency, pp. 19-24.

[35]Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil" (III:5), pp. 650-52.

[36]Ibid., p. 655.

[37]Ibid., p. 662.

[38]Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil" (III:5), p. 674.

[39]Ibid., p. 650.

[40]Etienne Pasquier, *Letters* (Lyon, 1607), 3, letter 1, quoted in Robert Mandrou, *Introduction to Modern France, 1500-1640: An Essay in Historical Psychology* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976), pp. 85-86.

[41]Valency, p. 62.

[42]Natalie Zeman Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 90.

[43]Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil" (III:5), p. 647.

[44]Kelso, p. 78.

[45]Maclean, p. 64.

[46]Montaigne, "It is Folly to Measure . . . ." (I:27), p. 132.

[47]Maclean, p. 64.

[48]Montaigne, "Of Pedantry" (I:25), p. 103.

[49]Ibid., "On Some Verses of Virgil" (III:5), p. 624-25.

[50]Ibid., Of the Education of Children" (I:26), p. 109.

[51]For an account of the Renaissance philosophy of education for women and proposed curricula, see Kelso, pp. 58-77.

[52]Roland H. Bainton, "Learned Women in the Europe of the Sixteenth Century," in *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme (New YOrk: New York University Press, 1980), pp. 117-128.

[53]Montaigne, "Of Prayers" (I:56), p. 685.

[54]Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil" (III:5), p. 685.

[55]Maclean, pp. 60.

[56]Montaigne, "Of Vanity" (III:9), p. 727.

[57]Montaigne, "Of Three Good Women" (II:35), p. 563.

[58]Ibid., "Of Three Kinds of Association" (III:3), p. 627.

[59]Ibid., "On Some Verses of Virgil" (III:5), p. 675.

[60]Abraham Keller, "Montaigne on Women," in *Nouvelles Etudes sur l'Image de la Femme dans la Litterature Francaise du Dix-septieme Siecle*, ed. Wolfgang Leiner (Tubingen: Narr, 1984) (p.35), and Insdorf (p.59), note that Montaigne moderated his views of women in his later writings.

[61]Anna Adele Chenot, "Marie de Gournay: Feministe and Friend of Montaigne," *Poet Lore* 34 (1923):63-71.

[62]Frame, pp. 82, 277-80.

[63]Insdorf also makes this supposition (pp. 59-71).
[64]Ibid., pp. 36-37.
[65]Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil" (III:5), p. 685.
[66]Ibid., p. 649.