

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Montaigne, Michel de. Selected Essays, and La Boétie's Discourse on Voluntary Servitude. Trans. James B. Atkinson & David Sices. Introduction and notes by James B. Atkinson

Laura Willett

Volume 35, numéro 2, printemps 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105846ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i2.19384>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Willett, L. (2012). Compte rendu de [Montaigne, Michel de. Selected Essays, and La Boétie's Discourse on Voluntary Servitude. Trans. James B. Atkinson & David Sices. Introduction and notes by James B. Atkinson]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 35(2), 168–171.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i2.19384>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2013

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

used to engage in meditative readings of the psalms. This reading imaginatively explores how the prints combine and re-work traditional spiritual processes; Melion's interpretation shows how the monastic contemplative tradition, as has been described recently by Mary Carruthers among many others, is revitalized in the age of print.

Melion's book will be of great interest to those who work on the art of the period under study, but also to those who, like this reviewer, work on art and devotional practices in other parts of Europe. The strength of the book is Melion's highly sensitive and well-informed readings of these images. The book is generously illustrated with high-quality reproductions of each image discussed.

STEVEN STOWELL, *Concordia University*

Montaigne, Michel de.

***Selected Essays, and La Boétie's Discourse on Voluntary Servitude.* Trans. James B. Atkinson & David Sices. Introduction and notes by James B. Atkinson.**

Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011. Pp. 410. ISBN 978-1-60384-595-3 (paperback) \$12.95.

Four hundred and twenty years after his death, Montaigne continues to inspire four or five books and countless scholarly articles every year. During the twentieth century alone there were six new English translations of the complete *Essais*, plus re-issues of older versions (Florio, Cotton). The more recent translations (Cohen, 1958; Frame, 1965; Screech, 2003) either appeared or were republished in low-cost paperback editions, and both Frame and Screech have been excerpted to provide students with a manageable volume containing what the editors believed to be the more important of the essays.

Why, then, this new, partial translation? Atkinson might have claimed that previous compilations were an inadequate reflection of the totality of the *Essais* or that translation errors deformed Montaigne's thought. Instead — and his point is well taken — he argues for the need to provide American students with a version of Montaigne that is couched in a language closer to their

own experience than are those made in England or published 50 or 60 years ago. Atkinson and Sices do break new ground in this direction. Readers will applaud the refashioning of titles so stilted in customary practice as to become incomprehensible: e.g., “On giving the lie” becomes “Correcting,” and “To Philosophize is to Learn how to Die” becomes “Through Philosophy We Learn How to Die.”

The book itself consists of a brief “Translators’ Preface” and a 50-page introduction by Atkinson alone (Sices’s contribution to the volume is never made clear), followed by translations of Montaigne’s own preface, eighteen of the *Essais*, and La Boétie’s *La Servitude volontaire*. Explanatory footnotes accompany the translations, and 24 pages of “Textual Endnotes” document the additions and changes that Montaigne made in the later editions of his book. The volume concludes with an index of names.

Atkinson and Sices never clarify just what motivated the actual selection of the essays presented here. In compilations of this type one expects to find, as we do in this book, the more famous chapters on the education of children, friendship, cannibals, presumption, experience, etc., along with a few lesser-known pieces that the editor considers simply interesting or key to understanding Montaigne’s thought. Such is the case here, with the inclusion of I, 1 (“By differing means...”), I, 8 (“Idleness”), I, 39 (“Solitude”), II, 6 (“Practice”), II, 11 (“Cruelty”), and III, 12 (“Physiognomy”). It is more surprising, but not unwelcome, to find choices that have not attracted previous compilers, such as I, 20 (“The Power of the Imagination”), II, 18 (“Correcting”), II, 28 (“To everything there is a season”), and II, 30 (“A malformed child”). No set of excerpts can ever do justice to the diversity of the *Essais*, a fact that this volume bears out by including essays that are less read but no less revealing of Montaigne’s intellectual complexity.

Beyond the argument in favour of a translation that is stylistically more North American and twenty-first century, the best justification for this book lies in the addition of *La Servitude volontaire*. Though modern translations of the *Servitude volontaire* are not lacking (H. Kurz, 1942, reissued with notes in 1975 and 1997; D.L. Schaefer, 1998), its juxtaposition to the *Essais* — Montaigne’s original intention, after all — allows us to fully appreciate Atkinson’s implicit contention that Montaigne’s relationship with La Boétie is essential to understanding his own work. Atkinson’s translation emerges as smoother than

Schaefer's, possibly because it follows a more recent edition of the French text, that of M. Smith (1987) revised by M. Magnien (2001).

The translations themselves are idiomatic, modern, and on the whole reliable. However, serious lapses do occur. In the opening lines of "Friendship" (I, 28), for example, Montaigne observes his painter's method, which consists of painting a classically composed subject in the centre panel and then filling its borders with grotesques. Atkinson and Sices alter the verb tenses and transform the fresco into a framed picture that is "hung" on the wall. Since Montaigne uses the artist's practice to compare painting to writing, and specifically to compare La Boétie's writing to his own, this mistranslation destroys the logic of his analogy. To complicate matters, the footnote that locates the source of Montaigne's Latin quotation in Horace's *Ars Poetica* misinterprets the meaning of the original passage.

Atkinson's introduction, too, deserves a caveat. Haphazard copy-editing has resulted in muddled dating and chronology surrounding Montaigne's translation of Sebond and his father's death (p. xv, n8). Much of the biographical detail consists of recycled commonplaces about the two authors, many of which have become obsolete. There are also some factual mistakes: page xvii has Montaigne hunting, an activity he despised; a caption on page 2 has the famous mottoes (65 of them since 2000, not 57) "burned" into — rather than painted on — the beams of his study; and page xl, note 56 gives the date of Montaigne's resignation from Parlement (1570) as 1563 to align it with La Boétie's death. More importantly, on page xlv it is claimed that the *Servitude volontaire* treatise attacks the tyrannical misdeeds of Charles IX and Henri III. If La Boétie wrote this text when he was sixteen or eighteen, i.e., in 1546–48, these two future kings were not yet born. In any case Charles was only thirteen when La Boétie died and Henri would not reign until eleven years later. It has been hypothesized that Montaigne himself wrote the *Servitude volontaire* after La Boétie's death — this is the position espoused by Schaefer et al. — in which case it would be accurate to say that he was alluding to these two later kings. While Atkinson explicitly rejects this hypothesis, he seems to have unwittingly adopted it without realizing that it made La Boétie's authorship of the treatise impossible.

To sum up, despite occasional shortcomings this book can be recommended as a readable and affordable Montaigne anthology. It provides

the texts we want students to read and underpins them with explanatory material that is adequate to the circumstance.

LAURA WILLETT, *Victoria College, University of Toronto*

Quiviger, François.

The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art.

London: Reaktion Books, 2010. Distributed by University of Chicago Press. Pp. 206. ISBN 978-1-86189-657-5 (hardcover) \$27.

Synesthesia, a neurological condition in which two or more senses are connected — leading to hearing in colour or tasting shapes or countless other anomalies of sensation — first entered the medical literature in the early nineteenth century and then virtually disappeared from about 1930 until the 1990s. It has since enjoyed a sustained renaissance, particularly in research related to neuroplasticities, which ground sensory and aesthetic perceptions in neurological responses. The early nineteenth century also gave birth to Stendhal syndrome, a psychosomatic illness brought on by a surfeit of beautiful art, usually, at least at the time, in Florence. The fact that both of these conditions of heightened and overwhelming aesthetic sensory overload became matters of medical concern in the early nineteenth century, before the radical shift to modernisms that vanquished visual “beauty” in favour of expressive “isms,” might well have been a result of sustained sensory excitement that had gripped art since the Renaissance.

Basing his ideas on both modern neurological discoveries (although these are mentioned only as asides and are never intrusive in the text), Quiviger is able to state unequivocally that “representations of sensory experience do stimulate the same region of the brain reacting when the real sensation occurs” (p. 167). In Quiviger’s analysis, Renaissance art — particularly Renaissance paintings and sculptures — deliberately triggered viewers to imagine sensations. The key examples he returns to, with great effect, are nativity scenes (of Christ, the Baptist, the Virgin Mary) in which the foreground is often dominated by the figure of a nurse or midwife who tests the warm temperature of the soapy bathwater, placed directly in our line of vision, while holding the “damp animate body of