

Carin Franzén and Nan Gerdes (eds.)

# Another Humanism

Subjectivity and Critique



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## **Subjectivity and Critique**

*Edited by Carin Franzén and Nan Gerdes*



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# Introduction

Carin Franzén and Nan Gerdes

This anthology reinvestigates and seeks to revise the tradition of humanism and the question of what makes a human in the early modern period from Michel Montaigne to Immanuel Kant. Obviously, the question of what makes humans human extends beyond early modernity and has preoccupied thinkers and writers throughout history. The question has prompted numerous arguments for human uniqueness that are often accompanied by a tendency to grant humans a superior status among other earthly creatures. Going back to Greek antiquity, Aristotle, for example, believed that humans differ from other animals through reason and speech. His definition of humans as talking animals (*zoon logon echon*) attributes to them a unique value, applied from a recognizably anthropocentric, exclusionary perspective. The Roman dramatist Terence phrased another influential idea about human nature: *homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto* (line 77). For British author Sarah Bakewell, Terence's idea that "nothing human is alien to me" has also been seen as a formative thread in the tradition that became especially associated with a focus on human experience and individuality—the humanist tradition that gained momentum during the Renaissance (17). Bakewell makes Terence's line a running motif in her defense of humanism as value that still has relevance. Although Bakewell admits that the concept of humanism is "a semantic cloud of meanings and implications," her study is a typical representation of a conception of humanism as a tradition that has traveled through and shaped Western European cultural and philosophical history since the fourteenth century (7). Another key reference in this tradition that

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Bakewell emphasizes is the Roman author and politician Cicero, who was one of the first to use the Latin word *humanitas* for an evaluative and moral purpose. In his writings, Cicero develops the Greek philosophers' idea that humans as talking animals differ from other animals by virtue of eloquence, which he even saw as the supporting force of civilization, as for instance in *The Republic* when he states: "only those are men who are perfected in the arts appropriate to humanity" (book 1:29). With Cicero, humanism becomes linked to culture and education. Humanism distinguishes a cultivated person from an uncultivated or barbaric one—or, simply put, the human from the inhuman.

Cicero's thoughts on studies as humanizing served as a foundational influence for authors who drew upon multiple aspects of ancient philosophy and literature during the European Renaissance, beginning in Italy in the fourteenth century. The term humanism itself was unknown at the time. Instead, people used the term *studia humanitatis*, which literally means studies of the human but which later gave rise to human studies or the humanities. In concrete terms, this meant studies in Latin and Greek grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy. When the term humanism was coined by the German philosopher Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer in the early nineteenth century, he used it in defense of classical humanistic education.<sup>1</sup> Since Niethammer, uses of the term have branched out to differentiate or associate different movements of humanism in history and hence also in the early modern era that comprises, for instance, both Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment humanism, the latter often being identified with the rational and autonomous modern human subject.<sup>2</sup>

Our aim with this volume is not to—once again—present the history of humanism in the early modern era as a continuity of anthropocentric themes beginning with Renaissance humanism's rediscovery of ancient thinkers. In fact, even ideas from antiquity can destabilize ideas of human superiority—sometimes the very same ideas that seemed to bolster it. To take Terence's famous dictum as an example, the disparate ways in which writers and thinkers throughout centuries have interpreted the idea that nothing human is alien to other humans is symptomatic of understandings of the human that offer openings toward more alien

experiences related to our own humanness. Famously, during the Renaissance period, philosopher Michel de Montaigne had Terence's maxim engraved on one of the ceiling beams in his library in Dordogne. Montaigne offers a quite radical interpretation in his essays: "the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself" (787). Such an experience of the alien, nonhuman, within oneself is not something that has conventionally been seen as an essential element of humanism, but it is one which reappears in several chapters in this anthology. Rather than grounding itself in human exceptionalism, this book seeks to explore early modern texts and practices that offer conceptions of the human that either challenge anthropocentrism outright or interrogate the power structures upon which it depends. While preserving a historically sensitive approach to the alterity of the past, this book is explicit about having objectives that are rooted in contemporary issues that stem from anthropocentric thinking and practices that render the earth less hospitable for a full diversity of organisms. Prompted to examine the humanist tradition anew through the chapters of the present volume, it reveals elements from a tradition that is more diverse, self-critical, and attuned to the nonhuman than humanism is often presumed to be.

## **Toward Another Humanism**

Challenging humanism is not a new thing. Modern philosophical critique of humanism—extending beyond human perspectives and domains—can be traced back at least to Friedrich Nietzsche, continuing with a questioning of human autonomy as for instance in psychoanalysis, structuralism, and poststructuralism. The anti-humanism of figures as diverse as Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault has been supplemented with the more recent posthumanism that has given cause to a new postanthropocentric turn in the humanities. Posthumanism seeks to leave previous definitions of the human subject behind in an "ontological turn," which means that all living beings as well as inorganic things end up on the same field. Only through this leveled new materialist or "flat" ontology can a more sustainable approach be developed, according to posthumanist theorists (see Bennett; Bryant; and

others). This may also suggest—as the prefix *post-* indicates—that we should leave humanism and its question of the human being behind. Critical posthumanism has justly challenged the notion of “the human” as a universal category, exposing the Eurocentric, imperial, and patriarchal interests that can be concealed within strains of humanist thought. In rejecting the humanism of the past, however, posthumanist thinkers risk reducing it to a stereotype. If written without taking a broader spectrum of historical sources into account or the nuanced critique expressed from within the field of early modern studies, posthumanism and also theoretical currents such as gender theory, new materialism, and ecological humanities risk affirming a monolithic, simplified understanding of the historical development of humanism. When humanism is construed as an exclusively anthropocentric history from which posthumanism seeks to break, the complexities of early modern perspectives on the human risk getting overlooked. In that event, historical perspectives that could in fact enrich posthumanist thought are lost.

Scholars in premodern and early modern studies have addressed these shortcomings using various approaches to distinguish between posthumanism and humanism. They share a common goal of enriching contemporary discussions on posthumanism with insights from premodern texts. One very unequivocal example of this type of scholarship is clear from the title of the anthology *Renaissance Posthumanism* (2016). Rather than reducing the conception of Renaissance humanism to the opposite of posthumanism, the editors, Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano, note that “critical posthumanism has ideological allies and philosophical resources in Renaissance humanism itself” (5). Going even further, the editors argue that “theoretical and critical ‘post-humanism,’ whether knowingly or not, has its roots in and remains an offshoot of ‘Renaissance humanism’” (2). More recently, a contributor to this volume, Chad Córdova, writes in his book *Toward a Premodern Posthumanism* (2025) that “ancient and early modern texts conceal unheeded potentialities for an increasingly urgent rethinking of nature, art, politics, and ethics” (5). While Córdova too praises the potential of pre- and early modern texts as being helpful in consideration of today’s urgencies, he,

like some other early modern researchers whose understandings of humanism include but also move beyond Renaissance humanism, demonstrates a more skeptical attitude toward humanism, as the title of Córdova's book suggests: Posthumanism is not "an off-shoot of 'Renaissance humanism'" but gets rooted in premodernity, thus destabilizing the chronological logic of the post-prefix in posthumanism. In addressing the complexities of how posthumanism relates to humanism, another contributor to this volume, Zahi Zalloua, reminds us of the irony that posthumanists, who aim to distance themselves from humanism (and especially Enlightenment humanism), may adopt a concept of progression from the very tradition they seek to escape. Terminologically (and historically) a posthumanism purified of humanism is not a valid option. What posthumanists must face instead is "the necessity of thinking with and against humanism," according to Zalloua (23). In doing this, we can "desire for a conception of the human—and for a humanism—that is otherwise than anthropocentric" (Zalloua 1).

The current anthology draws upon key insights from this field of scholarship. In doing so, the book proposes to use the pair of terms *Another Humanism* to cover the gestures that the contributors bring to light from a number of early modern texts and practices that make us today think anew about what it means to be a human. As we show in this volume, a number of today's posthumanist ideas are already expressed within the humanist tradition, such as the ontological incompleteness of the human, the undoing of human supremacy over animals, and materialist monism. By using the terms *Another Humanism*, we are gesturing toward how many of the historical texts that the contributors are treating are at the same time inside and outside humanism. By bringing them to light the book aims at bolstering a broader, less anthropocentric conception of humanism. Instead of leaving humanism and its question of the human being behind, the volume seeks to uncover a kind of humanism that recognizes that it is also something other. Thus, we are avoiding the term posthumanism in the title for several reasons. Our title offers a new way out of the terminological humanism/posthumanism conundrum in the fields of early modern studies as described above. As mentioned,

some of the readings and sources in the volume resonate with posthumanist preoccupations, but we also want to comprise examples of how some early modern individuals or groups without full access to androcentric or Eurocentric privileges challenge those power structures, not by adopting strategies with affinities to posthumanism but instead with humanism. As such, they have belonging within humanism, yet are at least as partial outsiders, critical toward it.

## Subjectivity and Critique

The question of what makes humans human does not only set off the distinctions between the human and the inhuman (savage, barbaric, uncultured, natural, etc.). Besides bringing together diverse early modern approaches, this anthology also gives new focus to the problem of human self-knowledge or subjectivity. As humanist philosophers and authors during the Renaissance shifted the focus from divine authority to human experience, they also articulated subjectivity in more explicit ways. Subjectivity is a particularly complex concept to deal with, not the least in relation to the distant past and longer stretches of time. The term subject, with its Latin root, *subjectum*, long maintained the meaning of “one who is thrown under”—that is, one who is subjected to some other power. But, in a modern sense, subject refers to something quite different: the self as consciousness as the “ultimate foundation upon which entities are rendered intelligible,” a reversal of meaning attributed to René Descartes, at least since Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Burke 20; Critchley 53). Some scholars have placed a gradual shift toward a modern conception of subjectivity at the center of humanism as what permits unifying diverse strains within humanism.<sup>3</sup> It is however worth recalling that Montaigne critiqued the centrality of the human as “presumption” (330). This kind of humanist self-critique is not unique to Montaigne in early modernity, but it is nevertheless ignored when posthumanist philosophers want to “bracket the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its conditions of possibility, and its boundaries,” as Jane Bennett phrases it (ix). Considered as an open field of exploration or a problem, this volume’s approach

to human subjectivity implicitly also involves critique. The goal is to diversify the conception subjectivity by demonstrating how early modern authors gave expression to variegated forms of critique against the idea of human exceptionalism or came up with ways to act as subjects that challenged, for instance, the androcentrism and Eurocentrism that is also a strain in humanism.

What do we mean by subjectivities and critique, and how do the two connect? Critique, like subjectivity, is a multifaceted term, but a first step toward a definition of both can be found in Foucault's definition of the historico-critical attitude we have tried to apply in our volume: "a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying" (45–46). Subjectivity is understood in this vein as something that is formed through different regimes of government and critique as the very possibility to question oneself through a "permanent creation of ourselves" that Foucault wants to oppose to humanism that "serves to color and to justify the conceptions of man" (44). Thus, an important aspect of this volume is to demonstrate that Foucault's "antihumanism" is in fact already articulated within the history of humanism, in its archive of texts for those who want to see and read.

For instance, it may seem that our way of understanding criticism and subjectivity—as a specific activity—actualizes the humanist motto that Erasmus formulated in the early sixteenth century: *Homines non nascuntur, sed finguntur*, that is, one is not born as a human being but is shaped into one. The notion that the Renaissance is the period when Western man formed himself through his self-fashioning (to use Stephen Greenblatt's term) is a tenet in humanistic research. Nevertheless, this self-fashioning activity is not only a technique of power that distinguishes human from nonhuman and safeguards the notion of human exceptionalism. As is shown by various contributors in the volume, self-fashioning can also be a form of critique of the very idea of human exceptionalism.

The idea of human exceptionalism is not only anthropocentric; it has consistently also been Eurocentric and androcentric—and in an era called the Anthropocene—destructive not only for its human subjects but also for the planet and its life in general. In offering another approach to the question of what makes humans



human, we seek, like Donna Haraway, to avoid lending ourselves “too readily to cynicism, defeatism, and self-certain and self-fulfilling predictions, like the ‘game over, too late’ discourse” (56). This volume proposes a rereading of early modern and modern humanism as opening pathways toward the possibility of another humanism.

With this aim we bring together leading international scholars and early career researchers to give and explore new perspectives on the diversity of early modern subjectivity that in creative and critical ways responded to or resisted the dominating idea of human exceptionalism as well as the subjectivation of bodies, thinking, and desires within the power structures of early modernity. The 14 chapters venture into a multidisciplinary—philosophical, historical, and literary—exploration of the humanist concept of subjectivity and its connection to critique and self-critique.

## Diversity of Early Modern Subjectivity

Montaigne’s importance for rethinking early modern subjectivity and reassessing the humanist tradition cannot be overstated. The book therefore begins with two chapters on Montaigne’s critical humanism, similar to how other contributors in the volume will offer dual readings of the same authors, thus accentuating their importance for our understanding of early modern subjectivity and its prolific complexities.

In Chapter 1, Zahi Zalloua argues that the Montaignian subject is defined by its ontological incompleteness and hermeneutic slipperiness. In reading Montaigne *avec* Žižek, the chapter recasts Montaigne’s singular skepticism as an engine of negativity that not only troubles the ego but also provides humanist philosophy with a theoretical jolt, a dangerous psychoanalytic supplement to its cognitive norms and procedures. The focus is on Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s engagement with the biblical figure of the neighbor, which he assesses as an alien, a disorienting otherness scrambling humanism’s hermeneutic compass. The chapter traces this unsettling presence of the inhuman neighbor in Montaigne’s representations of his own self and his dead friend, Étienne de La Boétie.

In Chapter 2, Chad Córdova continues this inquiry to rethink the humanist notion of responsibility to others, to oneself, to life,

by reconsidering Montaigne's essaying in light of recent work on the middle voice in linguistics and continental philosophy. Through the notion of the middle voice, Córdova proposes that middle-voiced forms suggest a hermeneutic or ontology of the self and the world that is simultaneously older than and ahead of the passive-active binary distinction that silenced and effaced the middle voice.

Adding new context to the study of Montaigne, Nicolas Correard argues in Chapter 3 that his contestation of human presumption in the essays should be seen as a seminal part of a larger movement that had contested the primacy of the human creature in the universe for longer than is generally thought. The very framework implied by the notion of "humanism," invented during the nineteenth century, may prove inadequate when applied to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writers and thinkers. Surprisingly, some of them should rather be considered "posthumanist," as for instance Mallorcan friar Anselm Turmeda. Turmeda wrote the novel *Disputa de l'ase* (Disputation of the Ass) (1417), which contains a dispute between a monk and a donkey on the subject of human superiority. Through a reading of this text and its early modern translations, Correard suggests that staging talking animals in order to shake anthropocentric beliefs was a rather frequent temptation among humanists, yet a risky one.

In the sixteenth century, subjectivity is also related to humanist inquiries that emerged in court life and in relation to government. In Chapter 4 Anna Carlstedt offers a historical analysis of Catherine de Medici's interpretation of Renaissance Neoplatonism and of her diplomatic strategies. Carlstedt demonstrates how the queen not only reshapes the concept of humanism by imagining religious coexistence in France, guaranteed by royal law, but also the period's dominating perceptions regarding subjectivation and her own position as a sovereign subject. As part of her efforts to reconcile Catholics and Protestants in France, Catherine married her daughter Marguerite de Valois to Henri de Bourbon, Prince of Navarre. In the following Chapter 5, Dariusz Krawczyk explores the relationship between civility and subjectivity in early modern political thought through an epistle addressed to Henri de Bourbon by Philippe Duplessis-Mornay. Drawing on Foucault's lecture course *The Government of Self and Others* (1982–1983),

Krawczyk demonstrates that civility becomes a tool of subjectivation, and shows how the prince's self-mastery and performative discipline enable him to embody power, illustrating the emergence of subjectivity in early modern political thought.

Another perspective on the relation between government and subjectivation that also functions as a critique of Eurocentrism is offered in Chapter 6, where Anne Fastrup explores the nuanced and complex ways Renaissance humanists engaged with the idea of the Turk, moving beyond the common view of their work as solely hostile toward Islam. Her study examines the works of Desiderius Erasmus and Jean Bodin, highlighting how these humanists used the Turk as a rhetorical tool in discussions about war, morality, and sovereignty rather than just as the "other" to be feared or despised. This reflects a tension between the dehumanizing stereotypes of the time and a recognition of shared humanity, or what could be called an "other orientalism" suggesting a more intricate legacy of Renaissance thought, one that acknowledges its complexities and contradictions.

Moving from France to England and further into the seventeenth century, two chapters delve into the singular works of Margaret Cavendish. In Chapter 7, Alexander Paulsson Lash demonstrates how Cavendish presents nature as a material, self-moving, and self-knowing whole. This implies that true knowledge involves understanding the interrelations among the parts of nature, including the subject's own position within it. Moreover, he examines how these philosophical models are embodied in Cavendish's drama, particularly in her final play, *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), where enclosed spaces serve as models of planetary totality. Within these spaces, Cavendish's philosophically questing heroines explore how to connect their local subjectivity to the infinite variety of nature.

In Chapter 8, Cecilia Rosengren returns to Cavendish's natural philosophy and explores her critique of Cartesian dualism. She demonstrates that Cavendish's concept of nature included mechanical mobility as well as sensory perception and intellectual knowledge, and that matter was therefore constituted by these movements, albeit to varying degrees. Expounding on these ideas and illustrating how Cavendish's three central concepts—"self-motion,"

“self-perception,” and “self-knowledge”—challenge the emergence of the autonomous and rational Cartesian human subject, Rosengren argues that there are intellectual synergies between Cavendish’s early modern natural philosophy and more recent new materialist and ecofeminist thought, particularly in terms of nonhuman agency and the relationality of matter.

Moving beyond the conventional Eurocentrism and androcentrism of humanism, our volume also highlights how early modern Mexican literatures offer diverse perspectives on humanist subjectivity and critique—through the work of Sor Juana, which is explored in depth in two of the contributions. In Chapter 9, Jobst Welge explores how the Mexican writer Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz projects a form of subjectivity and female voice that is disentangled from a fixed notion of (material) embodiment and instead aligns itself with nonhuman, cosmic, and natural signs and networks. Through readings of her works, specifically *Allegorical Neptune* (ca. 1680) and *First Dream* (1690), he demonstrates the tension between material-subjective embodiment and verbal-allegorical representation, reflecting on the power and gender constellations (including the role of the *criollo* subject) addressed by Sor Juana in several of her works.

In Chapter 10, Alejandra Acosta Mota focuses in her turn on the allegorical intricacies of the play *Loa en las huertas donde fue a divertirse la excelentísima señora condesa de Paredes* (*Loa in the Orchards Where the Most Excellent Lady Countess of Paredes Went*, 1681) in order to establish how its literary devices and artistic form (characters, space and events) convey meanings with moral and political significance regarding authority, and hence subjectivity, in a time when female patronage was rare and women were renegotiating their place in the world of cultural productions.

To be sure, reflections on early modern subjectivity and humanism reach an apex in the works of René Descartes, who has been seen as the founder of the modern subject. However, in Chapter 11 Alison Calhoun offers the possibility of approaching “another Descartes” through the uses of Cartesianism in seventeenth-century baroque theater staging where un-Cartesian instances that challenge the ideal rational subject can be observed. Calhoun demonstrates how theater was a fertile ground for

experimenting, with the unsettling relationship in nature between humans and machines creating a meeting place where it is possible for a spectator to experience what can be termed Descartes's "machine psychology": an experience that sheds light on another way of thinking about human subjectivity after 1650, not least in today's era of increased AI use.

While Descartes attracted followers, he also faced criticism from seventeenth-century freethinkers. In Chapter 12, Dennis Meyhoff Brink examines Cyrano de Bergerac's novel *The Other World* to show how unbounded imagination could challenge the Cartesian notion of the subject as stable foundation. Meyhoff Brink reveals how satirical writers like Cyrano exposed early modern Europe's belief in demonology and witchcraft as superstitious, targeting the prevailing conception of a permeable self. However, Meyhoff Brink argues that Cyrano's satirical critique went further, questioning not only these supernatural beliefs but also the emerging Cartesian view of the subject as secure ground for knowledge. The chapter demonstrates how *The Other World* employs an imaginative cosmic perspective to examine humanity from an interplanetary vantage point, thereby exposing the illusory quality of Western philosophy's self-conceptions that have persisted since Descartes.

Against this backdrop of early modern pluralities of subjectivity *Another Humanism* concludes with two chapters that reexamine and discuss the foundation of the modern subject in the eighteenth century. In Chapter 13, Sophie Bäärnhjelm Pousette places Rousseau's fictional work *Julie, or, The New Heloise* at the core of his social and political thought by demonstrating that his critique of idealized forms of love could serve to imagine love as an act of critique. The chapter explores this suggestion by taking its point of departure in Michel Foucault's conception of critique.

Moreover, if Kant could be said to have established the modern subject's autonomy, fulfilling the anthropocentric vein in the humanist tradition, recent research has challenged this assumption. In Chapter 14 Anna Enström looks further into the Kantian legacy by investigating the fundamental yet peripheral concept of *Gemüt* in his philosophy, suggesting a retrieved notion of the judging subject of aesthetics where the sensibility and situated corporality of the rational subject is stressed. Through

this approach, Enström reshapes how we understand the subject, offering a more nuanced view of Kant's role as a defender of pure rationality in the development of modern subjectivity. Thus, her analysis troubles the standard depiction of Kant as a steadfast advocate for pure reason in the history of the modern subject. This role has also positioned Kantian philosophy as a key source of the normative Eurocentrism and homogenizing universalism that undergirds racist thought, rendering it increasingly irrelevant in relation to critically engaged strands of contemporary aesthetic thought. The guiding question for this final chapter is: Can a revised conception of subjectivity have broader implications for critical engagement within the Kantian tradition? Extending this to the volume as a whole, we might also ask whether such a reworking could contribute to articulating another humanism.

History can always, and needs to, be reread, and such rereadings can even become a method to better understanding our own times. It is from this perspective that we set out to explore humanism and the history of subjectivity anew in order to better understand what made us become what we have become, but above all to spark new efforts to rethink and retell the story about ourselves for a more sustainable future.

Through its focus on forms of subjectivity other than those typically associated with a stereotypical humanist narrative grounded in the idea of human exceptionalism, this volume seeks to contribute to a renewal of European literary, philosophical, and cultural history by reevaluating the humanist tradition and its relevance today. We would say that humanism's ability to speak to us today depends on the fact that it actually harbors diverse and conflicting views of what makes humans human. This is because humanism has never been uniform but has also contained doubt about human exceptionalism that it still has relevance.

## Endnotes

1. *Der Streit des Philanthropinismus und Humanismus in der Theorie des Erziehungs-Unterrichts unsrer Zeit* was published in 1808. In this work, Niethammer laid out a comprehensive

educational philosophy that defended classical humanistic education against more practical, utilitarian approaches to schooling.

2. See for instance Sloterdijk; Zimmerman; Bakewell.

3. See for instance Zalloua 2–4.

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# 1. Montaigne *avec* Žižek: The Inhuman Neighbor in the Self and the Friend

Zahi Zalloua

## Summary

Both Lacan and Žižek turn to early modern philosophers as a way to recast the subject of philosophy. In Žižek's idiosyncratic reading of Descartes, it is first and foremost the emptiness of the Cartesian subject that captures his interest. However, this Žižekian view of the subject is already anticipated by Montaigne. The Montaignian subject is defined by its ontological incompleteness and hermeneutic slipperiness. In reading Montaigne *avec* Žižek, this chapter recasts Montaigne's singular skepticism as an engine of negativity that not only troubles the ego but also provides humanist philosophy with a theoretical jolt, a dangerous psychoanalytic supplement to its cognitive norms and procedures. The focus is on Žižek's engagement with the biblical figure of the neighbor, which he assesses as an alien, a disorienting otherness scrambling humanism's hermeneutic compass. The chapter traces this unsettling presence of the inhuman neighbor in Montaigne's representations of his own self and his dead friend, La Boétie.

## Introduction

Both Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek turn to early modern philosophers as a way to recast the subject of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> If Žižek rehabilitates René Descartes's subject, rejecting an all-too-quick postmodern dismissal of his thought,<sup>2</sup> Lacan finds in Michel de Montaigne a prefiguration of the split subject of psychoanalysis. In Žižek's peculiar reading of Descartes, it is first and foremost the emptiness of the Cartesian subject—and not the positivity

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of the *cogito* (the thinking substance)—that captures his interest. Indeed, as Žižek stresses, the Cartesian subject is paradoxically “a subject bereft of subjectivity” (“Introduction” 7). In what follows, I want to argue that this Žižekian view of the subject better describes or, at least, is already anticipated by Montaigne. The Montaignian subject is defined by its ontological incompleteness and hermeneutic slipperiness. It is beyond comprehension, beyond mastery and control. If Lacan credits Montaigne for his keen disclosure of the provisional character of the subject, in what he names the “*aphanisis* of the subject,” Žižek, surprisingly, never comments on Lacan’s praise of Montaigne. And there is in fact, to my knowledge, no trace of Montaigne in Žižek’s massive corpus; this is quite puzzling. Perhaps it was the favorable postmodern reception (by Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, and others) that the essayist received that is to blame, making him unappealing for this decidedly antipostmodern philosopher.<sup>3</sup>

In reading Montaigne “*avec*” Žižek, I want to put the (post) humanism of Montaigne in critical dialogue with the avowed antihumanism of Žižek, bringing together two thinkers who interrogate the nature of the human/subject. Toward that end, I recast Montaigne’s singular skepticism as an engine of negativity that not only troubles the ego by inducing moments of *aphanisis* or self-erasure but also provides modern philosophy with a theoretical jolt, a dangerous supplement to its cognitive norms and humanist procedures. Of particular interest, then, is philosophy’s lack of commitment to skepticism—which is deemed a stubborn obstacle or a mere moment in the pursuit of certainty—in contrast to psychoanalysis’s praise of hysterical doubt. In this light, we might ask further: What becomes of the universal subject of philosophy after Montaigne, after a psychoanalytically inclined reading of *The Essays*? Are all universalist aspirations to be condemned as manifestations of both human hubris and a violent will to mastery? Or can Montaigne’s hysterical and disorienting essaying, which perpetually scrambles humanism’s hermeneutic compass, be itself the basis for another humanism, a new thinking of universality, subjectivity, and alterity?

In responding to these questions, I first compare and contrast the Montaignian subject of *aphanisis* with the Žižekian *cogito*. Then, and perhaps counterintuitively, I turn to Žižek’s writings on the

biblical figure of the neighbor, which he considers the “most precious and revolutionary aspect of the Jewish legacy,” underscoring how the neighbor “remains an inert, impenetrable, enigmatic presence that hystericalizes [me]” (“Neighbors” 140–41). The figure of the neighbor triggers an even more radical move away from the humanist self. It puts front and center the relevance of the other for the self, making the neighbor coconstitutive of the self’s own being and making. If Greek philosophy neglected this hysterical presence, Jewish law recognizes the real of the neighbor, the neighbor as the “bearer of a monstrous Otherness, this properly inhuman neighbor,” as Žižek puts it. This is the force of the injunction “love thy neighbor”; this neighbor, this unsettling other, is *not* unquestionably good, your *semblable*, to be cherished without reservation, but, on the contrary, the neighbor is the embodiment of an impenetrable monstrousness. This neighbor as real can only appear as an alien, an endless source of interpretive resistance. It is here the neighbor and the essay form meet. The Montaignian essay, I argue, is particularly hospitable to the monstrous; its unruly logic translates the other without betraying the otherness of the other. Or rather, if there is betrayal, the process of betrayal is never without invention. I hope to trace this translation of radical alterity—embodied in the figure of the inhuman neighbor—in Montaigne’s representations of his dead friend, Etienne de La Boétie, and his own self.

### **The Žižekian *Cogito* and/as the Montaignian Subject of *Aphanisis***

The first thing to say about Žižek’s reading of the Cartesian moment is that it is no standard Cartesianism. As Žižek puts it:

The point, of course, is not to return to the *cogito* in the guise in which this notion has dominated modern thought (the self-transparent thinking subject), but to bring to light its forgotten obverse, the excessive, unacknowledged kernel of the *cogito*, which is far from the pacifying image of the transparent Self. (*Ticklish* 2)

Descartes’s error lies in his move to ontologize the *cogito*, to conceive of the *cogito* as a substance. Žižek returns to the promise of the *cogito*. Without the *cogito*, without the chance to “start with

a clean slate,” “to erase the entirety of reality” (*Ticklish*, 34), the subject would be reducible to the socially given, enclosed in its organic community, devoid of the very experience of otherness. The virtues of the *cogito* thus lie not in its masculinist drive for mastery, to its claims to self-sufficiency and self-transparency, but in its performance of hyperbolic doubt, in the ways in which it withdraws the self from the world, disclosing what Žižek calls the “abyss of subjectivity.” As a locus of negativity, the *cogito* becomes indispensable for both philosophy and psychoanalysis, a precondition for thinking the subject otherwise, for thinking humanism otherwise.

And yet, as Ernesto Laclau observes, “this is a *most* peculiar way of being a Cartesian” (73). Indeed, the Žižekian *cogito* could not be more at odds with the traumatophobic protocols Descartes himself outlines in *The Passions of the Soul*. Assessing philosophy’s epistemic norms, Descartes pathologizes an excess of wonder (the English translation of *admiration*); too much wonder paralyzes the subject of philosophy, resulting in debilitating astonishment (*étonnement*), a dreadful malady of the soul. As Descartes puts it, “[a]stonishment is an excess of wonder which can never be anything but bad” (58). A healthy *cogito* must be measured and must avoid the unsettling effects of astonishment by successfully translating the new into the familiar, into a body of knowledge, and thus delivering on the mind’s epistemic investment.

If the Cartesian *cogito* of *The Passions of the Soul* seeks a trauma-free approach to certainty, to knowledge production, more generally, the Žižekian *cogito* dwells in negativity, insisting on its trauma-inducing radical separation from the world. While both introduce a gap between the subject and the symbolic ego, the *cogito* of *The Passions* takes the form of a foundational substance, the Žižekian *cogito* that of a disturbing void. Modern philosophy, as we know, will aggressively pursue the traumatophobic path laid out by Descartes, producing ever more masculinist subjects, “masters and knowers of nature,” as Descartes puts in *Discourse on Method* (75). Psychoanalysis, however, will proceed differently, derailing the all-too-confident march of humanist philosophy. This detour is in no small part sparked by Freud’s “narcissistic wound” to philosophy’s humanist subject, which exposed

and insisted on the ego's radical ontological demotion. As Freud affirms, "the ego is not the master in its own house" (141). The discovery of the Freudian unconscious disrupts the identification of the subject with the ego. The full ramifications of the Freudian split subject take up much of Lacan's energy. In "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud," the early Lacan flatly rewrites Descartes's "I think therefore I am" as "I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking" (75).<sup>4</sup> The unconscious fractures the fantasy of the Cartesian *cogito*, revealing that being and thinking fail to overlap.

Unlike its Cartesian counterpart, the Žižekian *cogito* is not embarrassed by the presence of the unconscious. On the contrary, it avows the unconscious. Žižek often credits, and clearly is inspired by, the late Lacan's own return to the *cogito*, to the unsovereign *cogito* dominated by signifiers and led back to its "signifying dependence."<sup>5</sup> Like Lacan, Žižek declines to identify the *cogito* with "the self-transparency of pure thought."

Indeed, Žižek recasts Descartes's modernity, associating the birth of the *cogito* with what he calls "psychotic withdrawal" (*Absolute Recoil* 183). Still, this is a Descartes that is not recognizable to most philosophers and early modern critics (again this is Laclau's point). But, rather than dwell on the peculiarity of Žižek's bold overreading, I want to pursue a missed opportunity to expand on the ways Lacan's investment in the subject of the unconscious leads him to juxtapose Descartes of the substantial *cogito* with his predecessor Montaigne, along with the ancient skeptics. Lacan's turn to Montaigne in his seminar of 1964, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, should not come as a surprise. In his 1946 article "Presentation on Psychical Causality," Lacan had already aligned Montaigne with Freud in their mutual troubling of the autonomy and unity of the subject. Though we discover more in Freud than Montaigne, Montaigne's reflections on the subject's contradictions offer a promising alternative to humanism and the Cartesian narrative of modern philosophy.

And, of course, let us not forget that Descartes's inauguration of the *cogito* is itself a response to the challenges of Montaignian skepticism, which left the state of philosophy in a kind of epistemic paralysis. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of*

*Psychoanalysis*, Lacan returns to Montaigne and the question of skepticism to better isolate Montaigne's singular contribution to psychoanalytic thought:

Scepticism does not mean the successive doubting, item by item, of all opinions or of all the pathways that accede to knowledge. It is holding the subjective position that one can know nothing. There is something here that deserves to be illustrated by the range, the substance, of those who have been its historical embodiments. I would show you that Montaigne is truly the one who has centred himself, not around scepticism but around the living moment of the *aphanisis* of the subject. And it is in this that he is fruitful, that he is an eternal guide, who goes beyond whatever may be represented of the moment to be defined as a historical turning-point. (223–24)

What makes Montaigne psychoanalysis's "eternal guide" is surprisingly not his modern brand of skepticism but rather his "*aphanisis* of the subject." We know from Lacan that *aphanisis* is constitutive of the subject and its endless source of alienation. As Lacan writes, "when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as 'fading,' as disappearance" (218). Whenever the subject deploys language and substitutes meaning for being, *aphanisis* happens. Enlisting Montaigne in the cause of psychoanalysis, Lacan celebrates the essayist for having avoided both the paths of the skeptics and that of the substantial *cogito*. The skeptics' "heroic" adherence to the "subjective position that *one can know nothing*" and Descartes's discovery of certainty in the self-evidence of the doubting *cogito* ended up confirming and reaffirming the stable grounds of subjectivity. For Lacan, the skeptics erred in converting doubt into a kind of identity, and Descartes erred in his arrogance and hubris, in his investment in the humanist powers of consciousness, believing that they could yield certainty, that is, ground a permanent and constant "I," "a thing that thinks."<sup>6</sup> But what exactly constitutes Montaigne's *aphanisis* of the subject is never spelled out. We are only told that Montaigne points us in a radically different direction, one that avows the workings of the unconscious. What we get is a subject dislodged from its humanist horizon, a subject that is

paradoxically constituted by its own *aphanisis*. Against modern philosophy's traumatophobic ethos, Montaigne is seemingly a breath of fresh air. Montaigne's traumatophilic musings resonate quite well with Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan's approach does not aim at immunizing the ego from the external social hardship; it is not really concerned with curing individuals of their psychic disturbances. Rather, the point of Lacanian psychoanalysis is not to accommodate but to weaken fantasy's hold on individuals by compelling them to confront the traumatic real, "the most radical dimension of human existence" (Žižek, *How to Read* 3). And this traumatophilia in Montaigne is deeply connected to a hermeneutics of skepticism, a constant, hysterical questioning of authority, which, in turn, is inseparable from the essay form.

Lacan's brief gloss of Montaigne, however, implicitly decouples Montaigne's *Essays* from the question of skepticism. Lacan ignores the ways *essaying* for Montaigne is intrinsically a form of skepticism, and he neglects to appreciate how the *aphanisis* of the subject comes about precisely in the negativity of Montaigne's skeptical essaying. Indeed, it is a skepticism that touches the real, that obliquely discloses the limits of meaning and creates the necessary conditions for *aphanisis*. Lacan is surely correct to distance Montaigne from those who identify as skeptics, and in this respect Lacan is arguably far more sensitive to the unsettling logic of the *Essays* than Pierre Charron, one of Montaigne's early disciples, who rewrote Montaigne's motto—"What do I know?" [*Que sçay-je?*]"—preferring the more measured skeptical claim "I don't know [*Je ne sçay*]," which he engraved on the title-page of his revised *Of Wisdom* in 1604.

Needless to say, there is great violence in translating "What do I know?" into "I don't know." "What do I know?" illustrates and enacts the dialogic push and pull of forming and unsettling meaning. It sustains the becoming of the essay. Essaying generates meaning, necessarily abstracting from the particular, while, at the same time, signaling the limits of hermeneutics, displaying its failures and imperfections. Attesting to the singularity of its object, its irreducibility to concepts, essaying—the embodiment of "What do I know?"—foregrounds that interpretation is, in Lacanian parlance, "non-all [*pas tout*]."



I thus agree with Lacan that, unlike the ancient and early modern skeptics, Montaigne *persists* in his self-undoing, short-circuiting the skeptic's motto, "one can know nothing," transforming it into to the double-voiced question, "What do I know?" which, at once, questions the fact of my knowing and probes the "what" of my knowing. But whereas Lacan would interpret Montaigne's gesture as a break with the school of skepticism, I see it as a reinvention of a more corrosive and traumatophilic skepticism. This skepticism is by no means foreign to Lacanian psychoanalysis; as Žižek notes: "[T]he most outstanding feature of [Lacan's] teaching is permanent self-questioning" (*How to Read* 5). Psychoanalysis has a keen interest in hysteria. As Žižek says,

The hysterical subject is the subject whose very existence involves radical doubt and questioning, his entire being is sustained by the uncertainty as to what he is for the Other; insofar as the subject exists only as an answer to the enigma of the Other's desire, the hysterical subject is the subject par excellence. ("Lacan's Four Discourses" 91)

This is an apt description of the Montaignian subject. Žižek adds further: "Only hysteria produces new knowledge." The challenge here, as I see it, is to apprehend *aphanisis* in light of Montaigne's skeptical/hysterical engagement with philosophical humanism, and to be attentive to the knowledge produced by the essay: the most hysterical of genres.

### **Crippling Reason, or the Inhuman Core of Montaigne**

As a mode of inquiry, the Montaignian essay frustrates hermeneutic authority through its irresistible propensity to turn a given, received knowledge into a problem, a question (Foucault 389). The essay disempowers the signifying subject, cripples reason, producing hysterical excess rather than measured and authorized results; it frustrates the desire for resolution and finality, preferring interrogations over answers. The essay's reluctance to yield meaning fosters an ethos of endless pursuit. Lacking the properness of a philosopher, the essayist pursues—or rather staggers after—his subject wherever it pulls him. In "Of repentance," he writes: "I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled

and staggering, with a natural drunkenness" (610).<sup>7</sup> If such an essayist were to be considered a philosopher, he would be an odd one, an "accidental philosopher" (311),<sup>8</sup> as Montaigne famously writes of himself.

But what if we consider his relation to, and writing of, La Boétie? What role does skepticism play when the essayist claims to account for his "perfect friendship"? What we witness in his essay "Of Friendship" is a melancholic Montaigne, wrestling with the interpretive demands of his dead friend. In stark contrast to ancient thinkers such as Aristotle and Cicero who had argued for the voluntary aspect of friendship, Montaigne disrupts their grammar of friendship by placing chance at the origins of his friendship with La Boétie, thus underscoring what was beyond his control and understanding. Montaigne did not choose the circumstances in which he encountered La Boétie for the first time, nor can he explain why he was drawn to him. And, when pressured to provide an explanation for his love, Montaigne responds in the initial version of the essay with "I feel that this cannot be expressed" (139) and then with the following tautology: "Because it was he, because it was I" (139).<sup>9</sup> We know that Montaigne's famous post-1588 addition was written at two different moments. On his *Exemple de Bordeaux* (his Bordeaux Copy), Montaigne added the first part of the phrase ("par ce que c'estoit luy") and then added the second part ("par ce que c'estoit moy") in different ink.<sup>10</sup> Montaigne's "answer" dislocates meaning and thinking, interrupting the transfer of information from author to reader. Its sheer brevity is, nevertheless, not without its own rhetorical or sublime force. It gestures to the real, to La Boétie as real neighbor. In this insistence, La Boétie is more than the imaginary-symbolic neighbor—more than his alter ego, a mirror image of himself, with whom he "thought absolutely alike" (Platt 41), as one critic puts it.

While the appropriation, assimilation, and internalization of La Boétie may be to a certain degree unavoidable, Montaigne's utterance "Because it was he, because it was I" is monstrous to the extent that it vacates the foundational role of reason in the deliberation. It points to something beyond the imaginary-symbolic neighbor, to something in excess of humanist reason; it indexes a haunting and

hystericizing absence in Montaigne's life. The late utterance figures as an *explanatory nonexplanation*: It serves as an "explanation" while undermining explanation as such. Montaigne's addition to his essay short-circuits the humanist movement of comprehension; it hints at the inhuman neighbor, the real La Boétie. The consequences of this *prise de conscience* are revealing. The fact that La Boétie cannot be fully digested underscores how the work of mourning fails or remains forever incomplete.

In "Of Cripples," Montaigne prolongs this openness to the neighbor, paradoxically locating the other, the real neighbor in the very writing of his self. Taking stock of his self-image, Montaigne begins with a relatively uncontroversial observation: "we become habituated to anything strange by use and time" (787).<sup>11</sup> But he quickly adds: "[T]he more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity *astonishes me, and the less I understand myself*" (787, emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> Montaigne's own case, then, contradicts this general principle that identifies understanding with familiarity, knowledge with self-mastery. Astonishment here is no mere psychological unpleasantness, a mental hiccup in the pursuit of self-knowledge. As Žižek would say, we must elevate "astonishment" to the dignity of a fundamental philosophical attitude toward reality. Astonishment, in its immanence, discloses a barred Montaigne, a Montaigne haunted by a constitutive alterity—be it language, the unconscious, or the trace of others. In this astonished state, the idea of autoaffection—of affect falling under the jurisdiction of humanism and its sovereign ego—vanishes. Essaying creates this moment of *aphanisis*; it *gives* its author an uncanny, precarious, and monstrous presence. Montaigne writes: "I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself" (787).<sup>13</sup> Montaigne's humanity becomes unknowable and unrecognizable. We witness here the unfolding of a Montaigne who ceases *to be* human, even if momentarily. The monstrous names an improper Montaigne in the making, a Montaigne whose humanity no longer conforms to its humanist phantasmatic form.

Is becoming-monstrous Montaigne's becoming-posthuman? Maybe. It entails a kind of self-destitution, the fading of his humanity. It is tantamount to encountering yourself as another, as

neighbor—not the imaginary neighbor as the reader’s *semblable* or mirror image; not the symbolic neighbor who shares his wisdom à la Seneca with contemporary and future readers (a “French Seneca,” as many of his early readers felt him to be).<sup>14</sup> No, Montaigne emerges as the uncanny neighbor who incarnates the abyss of radical alterity. The bewildering experience of astonishment happens when fantasy fails to shield the individual from the “raw Real” (Žižek, *How to Read* 57). Montaigne’s astonishment is the ontological mood set by the traumatic realization of himself as neighbor, the experience of the gap between what he is as a determinate being and the monstrous otherness within.

Astonishment, then, signals the unraveling of Montaigne’s humanist project of self-study. Astonishment is after all what Descartes will warn us about in *The Passions of the Soul*: As an unhealthy excess of wonder, astonishment freezes and infects the subject of knowledge. In “Of Cripples,” however, Montaigne does not lament his “unsuccessful” translation, failing to recoup, as it were, his cognitive investment. Rather, in his hysterical/skeptical essaying, Montaigne openly defies self-reification and perpetually eludes spatial determination; he yearns for and thrives on astonishment, on the endless, multiple, and joyful pursuit of its objects. Unlike Descartes, who will seek to immunize himself against a pathologized, destabilizing experience of astonishment, Montaigne affirms the affectability and vulnerability of his self. Crippling undergoes a transvaluation of values. The Montaignian essay does not ignore or neutralize the self’s internal otherness but insists on its multiplicity and inconsistency, disclosing reason in its utter lameness, in stark contrast to modern philosophy’s fantasy of sovereignty and autoaffection. Like the lame, reason limps; it is crippled. The essay astonishes philosophy’s gaze, disabling its powers of reason, and jamming its will to domesticate.

To be sure, Montaigne did not champion astonishment from the start. In his address “To the Reader,” Montaigne outlines what he considers his modest project of self-portraiture. He tells us: “I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray [...] I am myself the matter of my book” (2).<sup>15</sup> The essay form is the chosen medium for the accomplishment of Montaigne’s self-study.

The essayist's desire to grasp his self-image, however, proves much more difficult than expected. Many of his essays bear witness to the incoherence, fluidity, and elusiveness of the Montaignian "I." A few examples:

Myself now and myself a while ago are indeed two. (736)<sup>16</sup>

Every minute I seem to be slipping away from myself. (61)<sup>17</sup>

We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others. (244)<sup>18</sup>

Needless to say, Montaigne's self-portraiture is predicated on the success of his project of self-mastery—they are one and the same. Dissatisfaction, from the inability to pin down his subjectivity, prolongs the writing of the *Essays*. Ironically, writing was initially intended to discipline Montaigne's mind, serving a moral function. He first conceives of writing as a taming instrument. In his essay "Of Idleness," the author narrates how he came to writing. In the beginning, Montaigne was looking forward to his retirement from active life, relishing the opportunity to cogitate in tranquility. But he discovers that within himself, to his dismay, resides an unruly imagination; he describes his mind as a "runaway horse," giving birth to "chimeras and fantastic monsters" (21).<sup>19</sup> Because Montaigne's withdrawal from the public world did not translate into the anticipated self-care, he turns to writing to domesticate his imagination, and to shame his mind of its monstrous production. Writing is thus introduced as a psycho-immunological practice, a therapy for the mind, a prosthetic relief for Montaigne's humanist self, hoping to shield him from the unsettling impurities of his imagination.

Montaigne's essayistic writing turns out to be what I have described elsewhere as an "autoimmune supplement" (Zalloua, *Theory's Autoimmunity*, 51) of sorts; essaying immunizes *and* infects, transmuting the original model of the self that writing sought to safeguard. This is a shock to the early modern philosopher, a crisis-inducing event for the humanist subject, whose imaginary and symbolic self-image is in the balance. Becoming-monstrous

is indeed untranslatable in humanist terms. Why? It compels you to face the “inhuman core” of your humanity. Žižek turns productively, again and again, to this psychoanalytic insight. The humanist, in his masculinist desire for perfection, fantasizes about purification, the evacuation of all excesses from the subject, disavowing the inhuman within. Montaigne the essayist sets himself apart from the humanist circle; he does not belong to this community of nostalgic humanists; he is not one of them. We could formulate the difference between Montaigne and his humanist counterparts in terms of Lacan’s formulas of sexuation.

Rather than referring to anatomical differences, the terms “masculine” and “feminine” describe instead two modalities or orientations, two ways a subject’s *jouissance* or enjoyment is organized or structured. For Lacan, the masculine logic of exception posits a subject who has unlimited enjoyment, who stands outside the law of castration that governs social symbolic existence; it is the sovereign exception that proves the universal rule of castration. The feminine logic, by contrast, sees no exception to the law of castration; it rejects the illusion of an uncastrated man (and with it the possibility of absolute enjoyment) but at the same time takes castration to be non-all, never complete or whole (Lacan, “On Feminine Sexuality” 79).

So, whereas humanism arguably subscribes to a masculine logic to the extent that it posits the human as exceptional, sovereign, unitary, self-constituted, and outside animality or mere corporeality, Montaigne can be seen as embracing the feminine logic of the non-all, which gives the lie to the phantasm of humanism, to its ideological pretention of wholeness by ceaselessly pointing to its incompleteness and inconsistency. Unlike the humanist sage, Montaigne acknowledges the “wound of subjectivity” and declines his interpellation as an undivided, sovereign subject, boldly avowing this non-all when he perceives himself as monstrous, that is, an unknowable and unrecognizable self.

Montaigne’s status as a signifying subject is in perpetual crisis, reaching its apogee in “Of Cripples.” In the alchemical process of becoming-monstrous, we can also observe a key shift from desire to drive: the endless circling around Montaigne as the monstrous or sublime object. Žižek captures well the impact of this shift:

[L]et us imagine an individual trying to perform some simple manual task—say, grab an object which repeatedly eludes him: the moment he changes his attitude, starting to find pleasure in just repeating the failed task, squeezing the object which, again and again, eludes him, he shifts from desire to drive. (*Parallax* 7)

We thus have two Montaignes: Montaigne the humanist, who sits down to write down his ideas, is the subject of desire, while Montaigne the essayist, who is constituted in the act of self-writing, engrossed in signifiers, is the subject of the drive. The subject of desire dreams of self-care as self-mastery, of successfully coinciding with himself, of realizing the project of self-portraiture. In contrast, the subject of drive embraces the inhuman within, his incompleteness and imperfections, deriving an unexpected *jouissance*—enjoyment in failure—from the impossibility of his task.

## To Conclude

As the subject of the drive, Montaigne's imperfections are not simply to be tolerated, overcome, or redeemed. In Montaigne's hands, imperfection is infused with a new meaning and value, exiting its hegemonic humanist orbit. Imperfection aligns with the figure of the inhuman neighbor, with the incomplete other, with what humanist thought has sought to repress or disavow. To paraphrase Žižek, only a lacking, imperfect, and vulnerable being like Montaigne is capable of friendship: The ultimate mystery of friendship is therefore that incompleteness is in a way higher than completion (Žižek, "Real" 308). For his humanist readers and would-be friends, imperfection would thus not be an obstacle to befriending Montaigne but its very condition.

## Endnotes

1. This chapter draws on material originally published in "Žižek avec Montaigne," in *Understanding Žižek, Understanding Modernism*, ed. by Jeffrey Di Leo and Zahi Zalloua, Bloomsbury Academic US, 2022, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.
2. The will to "exorcize" "the Cartesian specter" is not unique to postmodern thinkers. Žižek adds to the list: "Deep Ecologist,"

“cognitive scientist,” “Heideggerian proponent of the thought of Being,” “critical (post)Marxist,” “feminist,” and “Habermasian theorist of communication,” (*Ticklish* 1). And we could add to the list object-oriented ontologists and new materialists, to name a couple of recent objectors to the Cartesian legacy.

3. Take for example, Jean-François Lyotard’s enthusiastic endorsement of the Montaignian essay. Identifying it with postmodernism, to the extent that it eschews systematic thought and the hermeneutic comfort of “grand narratives,” “the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern,” as he succinctly put it (81).

4. Lacan initially frames psychoanalysis’s relation to Cartesianism in strictly antagonistic terms: “It should be noted that this experience [of psychoanalysis] sets us at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the *cogito*” (Lacan, “Mirror Stage” 75).

5. Žižek draws on Balmès.

6. “But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions” (Descartes, *Meditations* 19).

7. “Si mon ame pouvoit prendre pied, je ne m’essaierois pas, je me resoudrois: elle est tousjours en apprentissage et en espreuve” (805).

8. “un philosophe [...] fortuite” (546).

9. “Je sens que cela ne peut s’exprimer”; “Par ce que c’estoit luy; par ce que c’estoit moy” (188).

10. See Montaigne, *Reproduction*.

11. “On s’appriivoise à toute estrangeté par l’usage et le temps” (1029).

12. “mais plus je me hante et me connois, plus ma difformité m’estonne, moins je m’entens en moy” (1029).

13. “Je n’ay veu monstre et miracle au monde plus expres que moy-mesme” (1029).

14. François Garasse, qtd. in Millet 146.

15. “Je veus qu’on m’y voie en ma façon simple, naturelle et ordinaire, sans contention et artifice: car c’est moy que je peins [...] je suis moy-mesme la matiere de mon livre” (“Au lecteur”).

16. “Moy à cette heure et moy tantost sommes bien deux” (964).

17. “A chaque minute, il me semble que je m’eschappe” (88).



18. “Nous sommes tous de lopins, et d’une contexture si informe et diverse, que chaque piece, chaque moment, faict son jeu. Et se trouve autant de difference de nous à nous mesmes, que de nous à autrui” (337).

19. “faisant le cheval eschappé”; “tant de chimeres et monstres fantasques” (33).

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## 2. Letting Oneself Go: Reading Montaigne in the Middle Voice

Chad Córdova

### Summary

This chapter proposes that we reread Montaigne's *Essays* with our eyes and ears attuned to the middle voice as studied in linguistics and theorized in recent continental philosophy. It argues that signature syntagmas in Montaigne's idiom—reflective structures, especially “to let oneself go” (*se laisser aller*)—express a using (Agamben) or letting-be (Heidegger) of processes interrelating the self and the world. Such structures fulfill the status and bear forth the memory of middle-voiced forms. That is, they indicate a hermeneutic or ontology of the self and the world that both is older than and already gestures beyond the passive–active binary distinction that silenced and effaced the middle voice. After these textual-grammatical and ontological elucidations, the remainder of this text looks at examples of the middle voice in the *Essays* and suggests how reading or hearing them in this way helps us to better understand ideas of responsibility, compassion, friendship, dying, experience, and writing in Montaigne.

### Introduction

These searching considerations belong to a nascent rereading of the *Essays* (1580–1595) that is attuned to their anachronic possibilities and resonances now, in the climate of emergent post-humanist thought, ethics, and politics.<sup>1</sup> My remarks pivot around the question of how to think, read, and hear a signature syntagma of Montaigne's idiom that has gone largely unstudied.<sup>2</sup> What I suggest is that this syntagma gets us reading, hearing, and thinking with the *Essays* in a peculiar way, one that leads us to the

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crux of these writings and their provocative meanings and gestures: writings we are still learning to read, gestures still to be received, meanings still to come. It is this untimely, even futural, sense of the *Essays* that I try to attune to here—a new sense that also resonates with voices older than the *logos* of philosophy itself.

We find this signature syntagma or verbal structure, for example, in the penultimate essay, “Of physiognomy” (III.xii), as in this passage, on the rivalry without force or combat between the essayist and one of his favorite philosophers:

I have not, like Socrates, corrected my natural disposition by force of reason, and have not troubled my inclination at all by art. I let myself go [*Je me laisse aller*] as I have come. I combat nothing. My two ruling parts, of their own volition [*de leur grace*], live in peace and good accord. But my nurse’s milk, thank God, was moderately healthy and temperate. (811/1059b)<sup>3</sup>

“Letting oneself go [*se laisser aller*]”: the form, in multiple conjugations, iterations, and cases—*se laisser aller* (1×), *se laisser* (22×), *se laisse* (12×), *nous laisser* (6×), *nous nous laissons* (2×), *me laisser aller* (1×), *me laisse aller* (7×), *me laisse* + other infinitives (13×), etc.—is strewn across the three books of the *Essays*, with the first person singular forms appearing solely in books 2 and 3, but in all editions.<sup>4</sup> But such preponderance does not render its sense any more immediately apparent. How are we to read, or hear, this “letting” that is a “letting” of “oneself” and, in particular, a “letting oneself go”?

The question might seem to call for a merely grammatical analysis. And to undertake it we need not go looking for a framework; rather, we find ourselves already committed to one, namely, that of modern Romance linguistics. But to be committed to a certain grammatical hermeneutic, as Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Wittgenstein teach us, is to be committed to a certain hermeneutic of being or to a “form of life.” In the modern hermeneutic of Romance grammar, the voices are only two: active and passive. And, at first, “*se laisser aller*” might seem to call for an active reading. The subject lets itself go, just as one lets go, on a leash (a “*laisse*”), a domesticated animal. The going would be derivative of the letting, of a subject’s action, the ground or principle of its result, the cause of its effect. With the “letting” being the subject’s action as

cause, the walking, running, or rambling of “aller” would only be pseudoecstatic, pseudopassive. The “laisse” runs out and the leash yanks the neck; indeed, the collar or harness was there the whole time. Mastery masters what seemed to escape it, just as sovereignty, as Agamben has shown, haunts the bare life banned by its ban (*Homo Sacer* 1–67).

But this active, humanist reading—one that implicitly relies on the sort of ontological hermeneutic of the subject as ground of being and experience, which was as paradigmatically put forth by Descartes (Heidegger, “The Age”)—rhymes rather stridently with the profound attunement and response-ability to alterity, both beyond and within the self, that Tom Conley, Zahi Zalloua (“Montaigne and the Levinasian Other”),<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Long, and others have seen as crucial to Montaigne’s writing and ethos. Indeed, the active, dualist image of self-letting of a self-on-a-leash—of self-mastery of soul over body, subject over happening—clashes with another emblem of the “experience” of being, thinking, and writing in Montaigne: the “runaway horse [cheval eschappé]” (21/33a) that comes galloping out from “Of idleness” (I.viii) and idly vagabonds across his pages, even striking him dumb in “Of practice” (II.vi). Or, to turn back to the long passage from “Of physiognomy” cited above, we might note how the text gestures to a sort of push or momentum, a thrust or “inclination,” that bespeaks the way one finds oneself, at every moment, already in motion, already oriented, disposed, attuned (“I let myself go as I have come”). When it emerges in the passage, then, “letting” is less a producing than a following of what is already underway. Rather than the action of the subject or its forceful “raison,” the passage refers ethos to the spontaneous inner division-and-harmony of a singular self, a peaceful symbiosis of two “ruling parts” that the “I” does not control or command but whose happenstance harmony, a gift of grace, it remarks in gratitude. Moving from the voicing of the “I” toward that of an inner multiplicity and politics, the passage continues its slide toward complex alterity by gesturing to other possible origins for Montaigne’s happy complexion: his wetnurse and the milk that, by grace, was “moderately healthy and temperate” (811/1059b). We have moved far away indeed from the idea, and ontology, of Socratic self-mastery.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Essays*, the grammar of “letting oneself go” often thus seems to call for a reading that emphasizes not activity but passivity, a hearing of Montaigne’s words that is attuned not to action or will but to passion, disposition, alterity, temperament. The syntagm would seem to ask us to become attuned, that is, to what the demolition of “the human” as the being of will and reason in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond” (II.xii) would not encourage us to read as a sign of self-sovereignty. Indeed, reading and hearing “letting oneself go” asks us to avoid indulging in the metaphysical-humanist “presumption” (330/452a) that the *Essays* diagnose as man’s main malady (Friedrich 93–142), and this in a manner that only grows timelier with the continued precipitation of today’s global ecopolitical catastrophe.

To begin to move away from the active reading of “se laisser aller,” then, let’s look at another example of the syntagm, one from “Of Vanity” (III.ix), where reflexive constructions proliferate in a self-analysis that is hardly a phenomenology of mastery:

When I am in a bad way, I grow bent on misfortune; I abandon myself in despair, and let myself slip toward the precipice [*me laisse aller vers la cheute*], and, as they say, throw the handle after the ax. I persist in growing worse, and think myself no longer worth my care: either entirely well or entirely ill. (722/947b–c)<sup>7</sup>

In another version of the modern grammatico-ontological framework, that of Freudian psychoanalysis, what is here at stake would be readily interpreted as a mode of passivity. What Montaigne describes would be something like the suffering of an inclination, a desire or instinct, a death drive (Freud 44–60). The subject, rather than being in charge, is now at the mercy of the other. And, indeed, Montaigne’s meditations on phenomena such as falling, being-impassioned, succumbing, and dying (as in II.vi), some of which I consider below, do seem to flirt with a view of the self that borders on what some might read as an animalization of the human (see Gontier).

Yet it is plain that hearing “letting oneself go” in this purely passive way is only to heed an inverted version, the echo, of the active voice we have already sounded out. The passive reading remains, that is, within the very same humanist grammatico-ontological framework. From at first being the

subject, as ground and free cause, of “letting,” the verbal subject is now the object or effect of another agent, whether this be called drive, inclination, temperament, or body. Ultimately, the self is now an object or product of “nature,” which acts in and through it just as “nature” is thought to do in or through “the animal,” the nonhuman being supposedly bound by so-called “laws” or “instincts”—an ontology of animality qua natural servitude found in Pico and Bovelles as much as in Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and others, but which is as old as Western metaphysics itself.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it would be easy to locate this concept of “the animal,” and its deconstruction, in the same text in which we find the subversion of the concept of “the human” as subject or cause of its willings and doings: that is, in the “Apology.” To remain faithful to the lesson of that text is to see that neither the active, free “human” self nor its dialectical twin, the passive, subjected “animal” other is a concept to be used or a norm to be heeded any more. With human and animal, active and passive, deconstructed, we would seem to be suspended in the *epochê* of radical Montaignian–Derridean skepticism.

But are there only two options for “letting oneself go”? Are we bound to only hear Montaigne’s words in the passive or active voice, or in some akratic mixture of the two? What I suggest is another, indeed a third, option, one neither in opposition to nor a sublation of the other two but that undermines and exceeds, that comes before and goes beyond, both. In attempt to free our readings of Montaigne from the metaphysical dualisms that the *Essays* themselves so forcefully deconstruct, I propose that we learn to hear Montaigne in the middle voice: a voice older than and irreducible to the passive–active binary that subsequently came to hold sway and that so forcefully rules over thought and life still today. After introducing the middle voice and its significance in continental thought and linguistics, I return to Montaigne’s idiom and reflective structures like “se laisser,” which suggest a using-of-oneself (Agamben, *Use of Bodies*) or letting-be and releasement (Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*; Moore) of events interrelating self, other, and world. Hearing these structures in the middle voice gives us a new yet ancient sense of essaying that displays how the *Essays* help us rethink the notion of responsibility to other beings, to oneself, and to life.



## The Middle Voice

For continental thought, the significance of the middle voice stems from Heidegger's work, wherein phenomenology ceases to be an analysis of conscious experience and becomes, instead, a thinking of the presencing of beings. Early in *Being and Time*, in a section on "Phenomenological Method," the middle voice emerges when the idea of the "phenomenon" is illuminated by its Greek origins: "[P]*hainomenon* [...] comes from the verb *phainesthai*, meaning 'to show itself.' Thus, *phainomenon* means: what shows itself, the self-showing, the manifest. *Phainesthai* itself is a *middle voice* construction of *phainō*, to bring into daylight, to place into brightness" (§7: 27). Phenomenology will thus be defined as the letting-be-seen (*legein*, *apophainesthai*) of the self-showing: "[P]henomenology means: *apophainesthai ta phainomena*—to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself" (32).<sup>9</sup> In this way, Heidegger attunes us to a (cor)responding between middle-voiced senses of being—a presencing neither self-causing nor caused by a transcendent cause, neither active nor passive—and of speaking, writing, or thinking (see also §18: 83). This correspondence becomes increasingly important in his late work on "releasement" (*Gelassenheit*) and "letting-be" (*Seinlassen*),<sup>10</sup> in which we hear modes of the middle-voiced letting (*laisser*) that, I suggest, also resounds in Montaigne. Like Heideggerian thinking, essaying à la Montaigne removes the interrelation of self, others, and world from the enclosure of metaphysics so as to unfold an ethics of letting beings be.

In Indo-European languages like Sanskrit or Ancient Greek, the middle voice is the archaic predecessor of the active-passive binary (Benveniste). What it expresses is mysterious but seems to entail a (relation to) process that cannot be thought in terms of the active-passive, subject-object scheme that has reigned with such sovereignty in Western grammar, thought, ontology, ethics, and politics. Indeed, the active-passive binary elides nearly every trace, or echoes, of the middle, which thus survives in modern languages only as unnamed and unthought.<sup>11</sup> When Derrida asks us to hear "différance," and thus deconstruction, in this way, he gives voice to the epochal magnitude of this silence:

that which lets itself be designated [*ce qui se laisse désigner*] by “différance” is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, which lets itself be thought [*qui ne se laisse penser*] neither as a passion nor as an action of a subject on an object, neither beginning from an agent nor beginning from a patient, neither from nor toward any of these *terms*. But the middle voice, a certain non-transitivity, is perhaps what philosophy—constituting itself in this repression—began by distributing into the active voice and the passive voice. (9)<sup>12</sup>

For Derrida, then, a reattunement to and practice of the middle voice constitutes both a retrieval and an arrival, the futural upholding of the past, the memory of what philosophy as such elides. It is with these remarks in mind that we might understand Emanuela Bianchi’s intriguing contention that, here and there, the middle voice is becoming “the site of postmetaphysical philosophical aspirations” (258n89).

Turning now toward more linguistic analyses of the middle voice, we find a conflictual field with, however, some stable points of reference. For Benveniste, the middle voice voices a chiasmus: “The verb indicates a process of which the subject is the center or site [*siège*]; the subject is interior to the process” (172).<sup>13</sup> The subject is immanent to a process, which thus takes on a certain primacy, but it does so without being a substance or agent, something of which the subject then would be only a patient or object. Many linguists thus consider “affectedness” one of the middle’s core senses (Bakker; Allan). In the middle, the subject comes upon itself affected, transformed, engendered, in relation to a process, praxis, or event. The verbal “subject” is not the subject, not the causal ground or pure agent.<sup>14</sup> In reflexive medial forms, like the ancient Greek *chresis* or *chresthai*, the “use” and “use-of-oneself” analyzed by Agamben (*Use of Bodies*)—or, I would add, like “se laisser” in Montaigne<sup>15</sup>—no subject is transcendent to means or processes that would be effects or accidents of its will or substance; and, unlike in the active voice, no discrete object or end is aimed at or produced. Such medial forms disclose modes of being where active and passive, proper and improper, subject and object cannot be clearly divided out.

The middle often speaks of the happenings of life in which beings are interrelated and assembled; it speaks of finding oneself already responding, following, concerned, attuned, *in medias res*. It is the repression of this passivity without cause or agent, of this presencing and (cor)responding of self and other, by the binary schema of active subjects and passive objects, which drives metaphysics on, from Plato's dissolution of *akrasia* to today's attempts to advocate or oppose animal rights on the basis of the same humanist idea of the subject. To reread the *Essays*, eyes and ears attuned to the silent middle voice, then, is to bring forth an enduring provocation for thinking and living, one that moves through, before, and beyond Western philosophy, unsettling concepts of self and other, active and passive, subjects and objects. It is to reread Montaigne's critique of "virtue" and "mastery" and to see it as a mode of letting self and other be open to events and to ways of being and being-with in a more-than-human world.

The significance of letting Montaigne's middle voice resound thus exceeds its potential effects on how we understand one particular author. Rather, in letting an early modern text gesture to posthumanist futurity, it brings forth the anachronic import of the *Essays* in the ongoing history of thought. When we read in "Of the disadvantage of greatness" (III.vii) that "I have a distaste for mastery, both active and passive. [...] Superiority and inferiority of position, mastery and subjection, are forced into a natural envy and contention; they must pillage one another perpetually" (700–01/917–18b<sup>16</sup>), this is legible not only as the self-expression of an idiosyncratic man who had a problem with power. Rather, such lines give voice to an epochal disgust with the metaphysical dynamic that has dominated Western ideas and narratives of history, selfhood, and politics: They voice disgust, that is, with the dialectic of mastery and subjection (Hegel 102–16; Kojève). The *Essays* invite us to think something before and beyond both, a different way, a path of "différance" that essaying traces. Montaigne's ancient kin, the Pyrrhonian skeptics, abjured both affirmation and negation as twin symptoms of presumptuous dogmatism and of a failure to heed the abyss between static propositions and the "perennial movement [*branloire*]" (III.ii, 610/804b), the temporal-ontological flux, or shifting grammar, of the world: "I

can see why the Pyrrhonian philosophers cannot express their general conception in any manner of speaking; for they would need a new language” (II.xii, 392/527a<sup>17</sup>). Perhaps we should imagine this “new language” not only as a mode of doubting without asserting or negating but as the grammar of being in the middle voice, one that allows us to say and think the differential and entangled becoming and “mutation” of beings “from one thing always becoming another [*devenant tousjours autre d’un autre*]” (II.xii, 456/603a).

## Hearing Montaigne in the Middle Voice

With these textual-grammatical and ontological reflections in mind, I will now move quickly through a handful of iterations of what I propose we reread as the middle voice in Montaigne’s *Essays*. Similarly, but in its own way, each example asks us to rethink essaying, ethics, and the letting, self-letting, or responsibility at the crux of both.

### Compassion(ing)

The first comes from “Of cruelty” (II.xi), a crucial source for our sense of Montaigne as a thinker of more-than-human ethics.<sup>18</sup> The opening excursus on the uncanny resemblance of spontaneous goodness and laborious virtue sets us into a familiar hermeneutic of active–passive, virtue–vice, human–animal:

[V]irtue is something other and nobler than the inclinations toward goodness that are born in us. Souls naturally regulated and wellborn follow the same path, and show the same countenance in their actions, as virtuous ones. But virtue means something greater and more active than letting oneself, by a happy disposition, be led gently and peacefully in the footsteps of reason. [...] [O]ne action might be called goodness, the other virtue. (306–07/422a)<sup>19</sup>

This seems simple enough: Virtue is more “active” than an inborn propensity to follow reason’s lead. But when Montaigne turns from the paragons of ancient ethics to himself and denies that his goodness arises through what Foucault and Hadot would call the “technologies of the self” or the “spiritual exercises” of virtue

ethics—"What good I have in me I have, on the contrary, by the chance of my birth. I have gotten it neither from law, nor from precept, nor from any other apprenticeship" (313/429a<sup>20</sup>)—he also leaves uncertain the origin or cause of this goodness:

I owe it more to my fortune than to my reason. It had me born of a race famous for integrity, and of a very good father. I do not know whether he infused into me a part of his humors, or else whether the home examples and the good education of my childhood insensibly contributed to it, or whether for some other reason [*autrement*] I was born so. (311/427a)<sup>21</sup>

The certainty of paternity gives way to an open-ended uncertainty, suspending any search for principles or causes. The passage draws attention to the nonsynonymous equivalence of natality and "fortune." Both become names of anarchic spontaneity, of happenings without cause or why.<sup>22</sup> And it is this that resonates in Montaigne's phenomenology of creaturely compassion and its reflexive verbal form: "I sympathize [*je me compassionne*] very tenderly with the afflictions of others [*autrui*]" (314/430a<sup>23</sup>), he writes, at a point in the essay where "others" has already been opened, beyond the limits of humanism, to encompass the nonhuman other whose sufferings Montaigne cannot suffer:

But this is to such a point of softness that I do not see a chicken's neck wrung without distress [*desplaisir*], and I cannot bear to hear the scream of a hare in the teeth of my dogs [...] For myself, I have not even been able without distress [*desplaisir*] to see pursued and killed an innocent animal which is defenseless and which does us no harm. (313/429a, 316/432a)<sup>24</sup>

It is this chiasmic compassion, the nonpower or incapacity shared with the suffering or nonpower of fellow creatures—"this sympathy [...] with them" (316/433a; see Derrida, *L'animal* 48–49)—that calls to be heard in the middle voice, as a responsibility irreducible to and more passive than the passive–active binary. The *Essays* thus gesture to that posthumanist or anarchic "proto-ethical responsibility" that John Llewelyn has brought forth in his ecological rereadings of Heidegger and Levinas (*Middle Voice*): an attunement to others, a response-ability that does not merely follow reason or resemble virtue but precedes and exceeds both. If virtue is the active essence

of rational “man,” goodness is a caring-for- and being-with-others, in finitude and vulnerability, without reason or why.

### (Be)friend(ing)

And this, with more-than-human relations and compassion first, is the best order in which to introduce the next example: befriending and being befriended. For it is in one of Montaigne’s most famous essays, “Of friendship” (I.xxviii), that we find an account of friendship commonly (mis)read in a reductively humanist mode, leaving the middle-voiced and potentially more-than-human ontology of *philia* it proposes unrecognized. One reason for this is the essay’s proximity to the ethics of Aristotle, the philosopher whose metaphysics helped ensure the elision of the middle voice in grammar and philosophy. The retrieval of another, pre- and post-Aristotelian sense of friendship goes hand in hand, then, with deconstructive readings, after Heidegger, that seek to retrieve pre- and postmetaphysical understandings of nature, being, and politics, before and beyond the systematic inception of Western philosophy in Aristotle and Plato (Sallis 14).

It is not surprising that some of the most authoritative readings of Montaigne’s essay explore its proximity to Aristotle’s ethics, and indeed to a whole classical, humanist tradition of reflection on (male) friendship (see Langer). Indeed, there is much to support this reading, including these lines, where Montaigne ranks familial friendships lower than true friendship due to their obligatory (legal or natural) status: “And then, the more they are friendships which law and natural obligation impose on us, the less of our choice and free will there is in them. And our free will has no product more properly its own than affection and friendship” (137/185a<sup>25</sup>).

Friendship is here brought into relation with unconstrained freedom as its ground or cause; it would seem to be the product of free will, a pure activity. And, indeed, this could be referred to Aristotle’s idea of perfect or “complete” friendship from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that is, friendship between two virtuous men (139–40, 142).

But such an account is difficult to square with the most famous passage in Montaigne’s essay, which inscribes a wholly other phenomenology of *philia*:

If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, [c] except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I. [a] Beyond all my understanding, beyond what I can say about this in particular, there was I know not what inexplicable and fateful force that was the mediator of this union. [c] We sought each other before we met because of the reports we heard of each other, which had more effect on our affection than such reports would reasonably have; I think it was by some ordinance from heaven. We embraced each other by our names. (139/188a-c)<sup>26</sup>

Befriending is not, then, a pure performance, as if the will were not always-already predisposed, as if the “freedom” at stake were not that, not to produce or choose the friend *ex nihilo*, but to let be an entanglement of beings already underway. What “Of Friendship” explores, then, is how *philia* eventuates in excess of legal, natural, or rational grounds or aims. Like “Of cruelty,” the text brings forth a phenomenology of ethico-political relations before and beyond the limits and dualisms of humanism.

### Pass(ing) away

Similar in its internal dissonance and its propensity to be (mis)read in a reductively active or passive way is Montaigne’s ethics of mortality. This is explored throughout the *Essays*, to be sure, but especially in the essay of the accident, “Of practice” (II.vi), and, most famously, in “That to philosophize is to learn how to die” (I.xx). If the latter is often (mis)taken as an essay in a Stoic vein, this is because of its rehearsal of the philosophical spiritual exercise of premeditating death as a way to master (the anxiety of) mortality:

And to begin to strip it [death] of its greatest advantage against us, let us take an entirely different way from the usual one. Let us rid it of its strangeness, come to know it, get used to it. Let us have nothing on our minds as often as death. [...] He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. Knowing how to die frees us from all subjection and constraint. (60/86–87a)<sup>27</sup>

A robust approbation of Stoicism, it would seem. And, indeed, it would be hard to find, in Montaigne, a clearer expression of the metaphysics of human freedom over existence.

Yet this abstract Stoicism, voiced in the first person plural, is held in suspense by the phenomenology of mortality the essay unfolds. The departure is hinted at in the following lines:

In truth, in all things, unless nature lends a hand, it is hard for art and industry to get very far. I am by nature not melancholy, but dreamy. Since my earliest days [*des toujours*], there is nothing with which I have occupied my mind more than with images of death. (60/87a)<sup>28</sup>

What was a stark philosophical imperative, to be carried out by the force and “industry” of human reason, which would thus realize its freedom over mortality, becomes, instead, a mode of being to be followed, a disposition lent (not caused) by “nature,” an attunement to death that must be heeded and let be. The meditation of death is neither active nor passive. It is a middle-voiced mode of living and thinking death, of being-mortal, of nurturing response-ability to a singular yet shared mortal condition.

Montaigne’s deconstruction of the idea of philosophy as learning to die results in a therapeutic rethinking of death: From a horror to be laboriously overcome, the end becomes that toward which one cannot but let oneself pass away, and this not without a certain sweetness. Such is the upshot of “Of practice” (II.vi), where a quasi-dead Montaigne, as recalled or imagined *post factum*, lets himself go, sweetly slipping off to meet death. His being hit accidentally hits the millinery aim of philosophy; he is learning to die, without willing or trying: “It seemed to me that my life was hanging only by the tip of my lips; I closed my eyes in order, it seemed to me, to help push it out, and took pleasure in growing languid and letting myself go” (II.vi, 269/374a<sup>29</sup>). Here, in the experience of passing away—that is, the paradigm of the finitude of mortal life as being-affected—letting oneself go gives voice to a basic shape of the ethics of the self, itself, other beings, and the world in the *Essays*. It is as if, abandoning heroic individualism and all the pompous discourses, classical and modern, on the powers, privileges, and dignity of the human being, Montaigne had already discovered that true wisdom consists in the simplest yet most difficult task of letting-go and letting-be.



## Experience(ing)

Responsibility to oneself and others, and responsibility to life, death, and the events of the world or “nature”: The letting or releasement inscribed in the *Essays* is also at stake in what these texts call “experience.” In Montaigne, the term does not designate only what is appropriable by the self or its concepts but rather beings and events of such singularity and complexity that they lead certainties of selfhood and worldhood to be undone and reformed, in an endless process of knowing and unknowing (“inscience”) (III. xii, 809/1057c).

I have already mentioned the accident, where essaying or experiencing is figured as a mode of being-in-the-world *per accidens*, without the guide or dictate of active reason. We might also evoke the cosmic corresponding Montaigne suggests here: “I give my prudence small share in my conduct; I readily let myself be led by the general way [*l’ordre public*] of the world” (II.xvii, 498/656c<sup>30</sup>). And here: “In this universe of things I ignorantly and negligently let myself be guided by the general law of the world. I shall know it well enough when I feel it” (III.xiii, 821/1073c<sup>31</sup>). Or we might cite the passage from “of experience” (III.xiii) that describes a mode of “use-of-onself” removed from the active–passive carapace of metaphysics that does violence to human and nonhuman lives with its sharp caesuras between knowing and feeling. Rather than attempting to transcend ourselves, we vain, terrestrial beings should take a cue from the wind: “But what of it? We are all wind. And even the wind, more wisely than we, loves to make a noise [*s’ayme à bruire*] and move about, and is content with its own functions, without wishing for stability and solidity, qualities that do not belong to it” (849/1107c<sup>32</sup>):

I, who operate only close to the ground [*terre à terre*], hate that inhuman wisdom that would make us disdainful enemies of the cultivation of the body. I consider it equal injustice to set our heart against natural pleasures and to set our heart too much on them. [...] We should neither pursue them nor flee them, we should accept them. I accept them with more gusto and with better grace than most [*plus grasement et gracieusement*], and more willingly let myself follow a natural inclination. (849/1106b)<sup>33</sup>

Another name for this following, receiving, or responsiveness is indeed “gratitude,” a term that Montaigne asks us to “bring [...] into favor [*en credit*]” (II.xii, 350/477a) and that is a guiding thread in “Of experience”:

I accept with all my heart [c] and with gratitude [*reconnoissant*] [b] what nature has done for me, and I am pleased with myself and proud of myself that I do [*et m'en agrée et m'en loue*]. We wrong that great and all-powerful Giver by refusing his gift, nullifying it, and disfiguring it. (955/1113b–c)<sup>34</sup>

Gratitude for what is or what presences; thankfully-thinkingly responding to the being-given, the grace, of the infinite, dissimilar phenomena that compose a shifting world: Surely this is part of the middle-voiced grammar and proto-ecological ethics of the *Essays*.

### Essay(ing)

The last but in no sense final example is not one that belongs merely to the content of the text. It is the form or rather the (trans)forming of the contents, the writing itself. Essaying is not a methodical progression but a wandering of thought and stylus in consubstantial nomadism: “My style and my mind alike go roaming” (III.ix, 761/994c<sup>35</sup>). Always becoming, being written without end, like the self, the “essay” is not a form, concept, or even a noun. It is a verb for a process that is not an action of a subject but a middle-voiced unfolding of a thinking that is freed, like “a runaway horse,” from the humanist dialectic of mastery and subjection:

Actually, the thinker does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience, without simplifying it. While even traditional thought draws its impulses from such experience, such thought by its form eliminates the remembrance of these impulses. (Adorno 160–61)

Writing, essaying: These are names for the thinking that official thought, or reason, elides, just as the *logos* of philosophy is constituted by the silencing of the middle voice. In this sense—in this

voice—essayng is the graphic unfolding of gratitude and response-ability, a releasement or letting-be of self and other that stays faithful to the earth and earthly phenomena. Essayng consigns itself to the wind that carries the pen (“la plume”), and the self, abandoned to fortune: “And then, to confess the truth, I most often toss the feather [*la plume*] to the wind, as they say, and abandon myself to the mercy of fortune” (II.xvii, 496/654a<sup>36</sup>).

## Endnotes

1. For Montaigne’s posthumanism, see Zalloua, *Being Posthuman* 21, 26; Córdova, “Life in the Grotto.” For posthumanism, see Wolfe. For “Renaissance posthumanism,” see Campana and Maisano; Córdova, *Toward a Premodern Posthumanism*. For “anachronic,” see Nagel and Wood.
2. For Montaigne’s language and grammar, see Amato; Bjaï and Pantin. Strangely, the article by Quint, whose title deploys the key syntagm (“letting oneself go”), does not discuss it as such anywhere.
3. “Je n’ay pas corrigé, comme Socrates, par force de la raison mes complexions naturelles, et n’ay aucunement troublé par art mon inclination. Je me laisse aller, comme je suis venu, je ne combats rien, mes deux maistresses pieces vivent de leur grace en pais et bon accord; mais le lait de ma nourrice a esté Dieu mercy mediocrement sain et temperé.” Letters “a” and “b” specify passages from the 1580 and 1588 editions, respectively. The letter “c” denotes the marginalia Montaigne wrote on the Bordeaux Copy before he died in 1592. The parenthetical pagination in my text refers to the Frame translation followed by (/) the Villey-Saulnier edition.
4. Search results, which are merely approximate, are from the digital edition by The Montaigne Project, U. Chicago/ARTFL: <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/montaigne/>.
5. See also Zalloua, “Žižek *avec* Montaigne”; Zalloua, “Montaigne *avec* Žižek.”
6. A similar movement, including the demarcation from Socratic virtue and a forceful dissolution of the idea of the single cause, principle, or origin, takes place in “Of cruelty” (II.xi, 311/427a), which I discuss further on.
7. “Quand je suis en mauvais estat, je m’acharne au mal; je m’abandonne par desespoir et me laisse aller vers la cheute et

jette, comme on dict, le manche apres la coignée; je m'obstine à l'empirement et ne m'estime plus digne de mon soing; ou tout bien ou tout mal."

8. On the history and metaphysics of "the animal" and of the human-animal distinction, see de Fontenay; Agamben, *Open*; Derrida, *L'animal*.

9. I have transliterated the Greek from Heidegger's text.

10. For Heidegger's releasement and letting-be, see Moore; Schürmann. For letting as noncausal, see Heidegger, "Seminar in Le Thor 1969" 59.

11. Beginning with Dionysius Thrax, even ancient grammarians often mischaracterized and misunderstood the middle due to the already-established dominance of pure active and passive forms (Rijksbaron 361).

12. My translation. "[C]e qui se laisse désigner par 'différance' n'est ni simplement actif ni simplement passif, annonçant ou rappelant plutôt quelque chose comme la voix moyenne, disant une opération qui n'est pas une opération, qui ne se laisse penser ni comme passion ni comme action d'un sujet sur un objet, ni à partir d'un agent ni à partir d'un patient, ni à partir ni en vue d'aucun de ces *termes*. Or la voix moyenne, une certaine non-transitivité, est peut-être ce que la philosophie, se constituant en cette répression, a commencé par distribuer en voix active et voix passive." For a helpful elucidation, see Llewelyn, *Derrida* 90-4.

13. My translation. "[L]e verbe indique un procès dont le sujet est le siège; le sujet est intérieur au procès."

14. In ancient Greek and Latin, "to grow," "to conceive," "to suffer," "to die," "to be sad," "to enjoy," even "to speak" (*loquor*) are examples of verbs that tend to the middle voice (see Agamben, *Use of Bodies* 25-27; Benveniste 171-72; Gonda 50-52; Bakker 30; Allan 43-44, 50). In Latin, the middle survives most clearly in deponent verbs.

15. Indeed, it is in the reflexive systems that the middle survives in modern European languages (Allan 4).

16. "Je suis desgousté de maistrise et active et passive. [...] La superiorité et inferiorité, la maistrise et la subjection, sont obligées à une naturelle envie et contestation; il faut qu'elles s'entrepillent perpetuellement."

17. “Je voy les philosophes Pyrrhoniens qui ne peuvent exprimer leur generale conception en aucune maniere de parler: car il leur faudroit un nouveau langage.”

18. See Córdova, “Responsibility to Other Creatures.” Beyond the attention it has drawn from Montaigne scholars, the essay has caught the eye of philosophers of ecological ethics (e.g., Curry 181–82).

19. “Il me semble que la vertu est chose autre et plus noble que les inclinations à la bonté qui naissent en nous. Les ames réglées d’elles mesmes et bien nées, elles suyvent mesme train, et representent en leurs actions mesme visage que les vertueuses. Mais la vertu sonne je ne sçay quoy de plus grand et de plus actif que de se laisser, par une heureuse complexion, doucement et paisiblement conduire à la suite de la raison. [...] l’une action se pourroit dire bonté; l’autre, vertu.”

20. “Ce que j’ay de bien, je l’ay au rebours par le sort de ma naissance. Je ne le tiens ny de loy, ny de precepte, ou autre apprentissage.”

21. “[J]e le doy plus à ma fortune qu’à ma raison. Elle m’a faict naistre d’une race fameuse en preud’homie et d’un tres-bon pere: je ne sçay s’il a escoulé en moy partie de ses humeurs, ou bien si les exemples domestiques et la bonne institution de mon enfance y ont insensiblement aydé; ou si je suis autrement ainsi nay.”

22. For this idea of the “anarchic,” see Schürmann.

23. “[J]e me compassionne fort tendrement des afflictions d’autrui.”

24. “Mais c’est jusques à telle mollesse que je ne voy pas égorger un poulet sans desplaisir, et ois impatientment gemir un lievre sous les dens de mes chiens [...] De moy, je n’ay pas sçeu voir seulement sans desplaisir poursuivre et tuer une beste innocente, qui est sans deffence et de qui nous ne recevons aucune offence.”

25. “Et puis, à mesure que ce sont amitié que la loy et l’obligation naturelle nous commande, il y a d’autant moins de nostre choïs et liberté volontaire. Et nostre liberté volontaire n’a point de production qui soit plus proprement sienne que celle de l’affection et amitié.”

26. “Si on me presse de dire pourquoy je l’aymois, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer, [c] qu’en respondant: Par ce que c’estoit luy; par ce que c’estoit moy. [a] Il y a, au delà de tout mon discours, et de ce que j’en puis dire particulièrement, ne sçay quelle force inexplicable et fatale, mediatrice de cette union. [c] Nous nous

cherchions avant que de nous estre veus, et par des rapports que nous oyions l'un de l'autre, qui faisoient en nostre affection plus d'effort que ne porte la raison des rapports, je croy par quelque ordonnance du ciel: nous nous embrassions par noz noms."

27. "Et pour commencer à luy oster son plus grand avantage contre nous, prenons voye toute contraire à la commune. Ostons luy l'estrangeté, pratiquons le, accoustumons le. N'ayons rien si souvent en la teste que la mort. [...] Qui a appris à mourir, il a desappris à servir. Le sçavoir mourir nous afranchit de toute subjection et contrainte."

28. "A la vérité, en toutes choses, si nature ne preste un peu, il est malaisé que l'art et l'industrie aillent guiere avant. Je suis de moy-mesme non melancholique, mais songecreux. Il n'est rien dequoy je me soye des toujours plus entretenu que des imaginations de la mort."

29. "Il me sembloit que ma vie ne me tenoit plus qu'au bout des lèvres: je fermois les yeux pour ayder, ce me sembloit, à la pousser hors, et prenois plaisir à m'alanguir et à me laisser aller."

30. "Je fay peu de part à ma prudence de ma conduite: je me laisse volontiers mener à l'ordre public du monde."

31. "En ceste université, je me laisse ignoramment et negligemment manier à la loy generale du monde. Je la sçauray assez quand je la sentiray."

32. "Mais quoy, nous sommes par tout vent. Et le vent encore, plus sagement que nous, s'ayme à bruire, à s'agiter, et se contente en ses propres offices, sans desirer la stabilité, la solidité, qualitez non siennes."

33. "Moy, qui ne manie que terre à terre, hay cette inhumaine sapience qui nous veut rendre desdaigneux et ennemis de la culture du corps. J'estime pareille injustice prendre à contre coeur les voluptez naturelles que de les prendre trop à coeur. [...] Il ne les faut ny suivre, ny fuir, il les faut recevoir. Je les reçois un peu plus grassement et gracieusement, et me laisse plus volontiers aller vers la pente naturelle."

34. "J'accepte de bon coeur, [c] et recognoissant, [b] ce que nature a fait pour moy, et m'en agréé et m'en loue. On fait tort à ce grand et tout puissant donneur de refuser son don, l'annuller et desfigurer."

35. "Mon stile et mon esprit vont vagabondant de mesmes."

36. “Et lors, à confesser la vérité, je jette le plus souvent la plume au vent, comme on dict, et m’abandonne à la mercy de la fortune.”

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### 3. The Ass and the Philosopher: Turmeda and the Talking Animals

Nicolas Correard

#### Summary

One of the earliest expressions of the Renaissance *miseria* versus *dignitas hominis* debate, the *Disputa de l'ase* (Disputation of the Ass) by the Mallorcan renegade Anselm Turmeda, written in Tunis in 1417–1418, has received little attention. It stages a fictional dispute between the character of the author, Brother Anselm, and a wise ass, which successfully contradicts all the arguments alleged in favor of the primacy of man, except the idea of a special religious vocation distinguishing humans from animals. Inspired by the twenty-second epistle of the Islamic *Ikwān Al-Ṣafā*, this text circulated in the original Catalan version before being struck by censorship. It survived only through a French translation edited in 1544 in Lyon. The trespassing of the border between humanity and animality may have been as unbearable, to the eyes of the Inquisitors, as the trespassing of the border between Muslim and Christian worlds. Yet the success of the 1544 edition, which reinforced the craze throughout Europe for dialogues in which animals challenge anthropocentric assumptions, and its probable influence on some of them, show that another humanism, prone to antispeciesism, was extremely vivid before it was repressed, and then neglected by modern scholarship, too often blinded by the problematic notion of “humanism.”

#### Introduction

Let him with the utmost power of his discourse make me understand, upon what foundation, he hath built those great advantages

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and ods, he supposeth to have over other creatures [...] Is it possible to imagine any thing so ridiculous, as this miserable and wretched creature [...] dareth call himselfe the Master and Emperour of this Universe? (Montaigne, *Essayes*, 141)<sup>1</sup>

Montaigne's essay "Apologie de Raymond Sebond" (1580) marks a well-known turning point in European thought, and the beginnings of what historian of ideas George Boas calls the "theriophilic tradition" of early modern philosophy, favorable to animals. Or did it mark the beginning of the end for the age-old creed about man's centrality in the world, initially established by the arguments of ancient philosophical schools (first and foremost Stoicism), and reinforced by a post-Nicaea consensus among Christian theologians, according to which God submitted all creatures to man, the *imago dei* (Genesis 1:26–28)? Montaigne's doubt about the primacy of man was fueled by the *dignitas* versus *miseria hominis* debate; by the turmoil of religious wars and his personal detachment from Christian culture; or by his skeptical challenge to the claims of (human) reason. In most of the historical accounts of the Renaissance, Montaigne seems to stand alone, as if he was an exception belonging to a "Counter-Renaissance" (Haydn) running underneath the dominant current of the apology of the dignity of man, expressed by Pico de la Mirandola's famous *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486). But the "Apologie" might rather be seen as the tip of a vast movement contesting the primacy of the human creature in the universe, which started earlier than is generally thought. The very framework implied by the notion of "humanism," invented by nineteenth-century historiographers, may prove inadequate applied to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century men of letters. Surprisingly, some of them should rather be considered "posthumanists," if we want to use accurately a modern terminology (Campana and Maisano 1–36).

A case example is provided by the destiny of a peculiar and almost forgotten text published in a French translation, under the title *Disputation de l'asne contre frere Anselme Turmeda*, in 1544 in Lyon, while it was written a century before in Catalan language by the Mallorcan friar Anselm Turmeda. The original text is lost, and from Lluís Destany's first attempt in 1922 to the present the *Disputa del ase* has been translated back several times from

French to Catalan. It is still known and studied by the rather small community of scholars specialized in Catalan literature. To our knowledge, there is no English translation available, while there is a French reedition with critical apparatus (*Dispute de l'âne*, 1984);<sup>2</sup> several Spanish editions, translated from the French; and a German edition, also translated from the French (*Der Disput des Esels*, 2007), the second one after the *Gespräch des Esels wider Bruder Anselmum von Turmedam* (1606), itself based on the earlier French translation. In any case, the text is only known through the 1544 Lyon edition. This may account for its limited reception. Moreover, the fact that the author, Turmeda, was a convert to Islam, who lived in Tunis when he wrote this dialogue in 1417–1418, has always been controversial. The very subject of the dialogue, which deeply questions anthropocentric assumptions despite consecrating the superiority of man over other creatures at its very end, may also have been felt as problematic at the time, as we will see.

The fiction runs as follows. Brother Anselm tells how, resting under a tree in a beautiful meadow, he heard in a dream an assembly of animals talking. They had gathered to celebrate the election of a new king, a tawny lion. While feasting, a rabbit recognizes Brother Anselm, because she had been offered to him some time ago, in Tunis, as a diplomatic gift, but then had managed to escape Turmeda's garden. Scandalously, explains the rabbit, Brother Anselm goes everywhere claiming that man is superior to other creatures and that God has entitled his species to dominate. Brother Anselm is summoned by the assembly, and the king lion asks him to put forward his arguments, while a scruffy ass is ironically appointed as his contradictor. The body of the text is organized as a medieval academic *disputatio*, a dispute in which the speeches of the philosopher and the ass alternate: The arguments of the former, *pro-dignitate hominis*, are systematically and eloquently ruined by the latter, more knowledgeable than it seems at first. As the 1544 French translator noticed in his prefatory epistle, this ass could rival Augustine or Chrysostom in theology, Aristotle in philosophy, Albumasar in astrology, Hippocrates in medicine, and so on and so forth (Turmeda, 42). Nineteen arguments are reviewed until the last one—that God took a human shape, or, to

put it in other words, the Christian dogma of incarnation—finally wins over the ass, forced to admit that he is defeated.

By many standards, this playful and philosophical staging of the *dignitas* versus *miseria hominis* debate requires interpretation. We are not going to launch either into an in-depth study of the history of this text, which has already been traced back, or into a detailed analysis of its contents. Rather than dwelling on the specific case of this *Disputa del ase*, we would like to understand the overall significance of its publication in 1544. Why is it so meaningful that such a text was translated into French then and there, and why did we lose the original version? Was it something so singular, or so special, to stage an animal challenging the arguments for *dignitas hominis*? What does it reveal about the existence of another humanism that has always been downplayed by modern historiography, either that it was severely repressed at the time (and therefore little known afterwards), or that modern scholars neglected the evidence of its existence (or both)? After surveying some elements in the history of the text and its reception, we will show that staging animal speech in order to shake anthropocentric beliefs was a rather frequent temptation among early modern humanists, and yet a risky one. We will finally turn to similar texts suggesting that the *Disputa* may have had more influence than is generally thought.

### Itineraries of a Renegade Text

Anselm Turmeda (1352–1425?) was one of the last heirs of Ramon Llull, and a protagonist of the Catalan humanistic movement, paralleling the Italian movement for the revival of *literae humaniores*. Born in Palma de Mallorca, he studied in Lerida and became a Franciscan friar at the monastery of Montblanch, near Tarragona, before he resumed his studies, with a probable stay in Paris and a documented stay at the university of Bologna. There he probably crossed the first replies to the theses expounded by Lotario di Segni (Pope Innocent III) in his *De miseria humanæ condicionis* (1284). They would lead, before Pico, to the 1459 *De dignitate hominis* by Gianozzo Manetti, a staunch praise of human reason and divine vocation, or to the writing of the *Liber creaturum* (1436) by Turmeda's Catalan contemporary Ramon

Sibiunda (or Raymond Sebond), whose tenets, precisely, would be the butt of Montaigne's irony (even if Montaigne, who retranslated and edited the text in 1581, pretended to write an "Apologie" in Sebond's praise in his essay).

After going back to Mallorca, Turmeda left for Sicily, and then for Tunis, where he converted himself to Islam and worked for the Hafsid sovereigns Abou-l-Abbas and Abou-Fariz as head of the Customs, and probably as a translator and diplomat—earning the name of Abdalah-al-Tardjuman ("Abdalah the Translator"). He had conceived the firm design to convert himself a long time ago, while studying in Bologna, struck as he was by the absurdity of some Christian creeds, such as the dogma of trinity and incarnation, if we follow what Turmeda himself is supposed to have written in Arabic in the *Tuhfat al-Adīb fī al-radd 'alā ahl al-ṣalīb* ("The Gift of the Man of Letters in Order to Refute the Partisans of the Cross"), his most renowned work in the Muslim world, a short treatise telling his exemplary itinerary of an apostate, and comparing the three monotheist religions in favor of Islam. The attribution of this work, which might be apocryphal, has been contested. The fact that the *Tuhfa* derides the belief in incarnation, while this very belief sets the *Disputa* with the victory of the thesis of *dignitas hominis*, would be a major contradiction. In any case, we may wonder why Turmeda wrote the rest of his works in Catalan, including moral poems (*Llibre de bons admonestaments*), and a history of the independent kingdom of Mallorca (*Cobles del regne de Mallorques*) while he stayed in Tunis until his death. From what we know, there was a rather strong Catalan community in this city, and the Hafsids kept a good relationship with the crown of Aragon. Moreover, we know that Turmeda was probably sent in embassy to Christian lands. Some scholars advanced the hypothesis that he intended to emigrate back.

The problem of the sources is also complex. When the Lyon edition was rediscovered and published in 1911 by Fouché-Delbosc and then attracted attention in Catalonia, a prominent Spanish orientalist, Miguel Asín Palacios, issued a long article in order to prove that Turmeda was a "plagiarist": The renegade writer would have drawn his matter from an Arabic text, the twenty-second epistle belonging to the encyclopedic compendium of the *Epistles*



of the Brethren of Purity (*Ikwān Al-Ṣafā*). The demonstration is rather convincing, except for the use of the notion of “plagiarism,” which is totally flawed concerning a late medieval or early Renaissance adaptation.<sup>3</sup> Turmeda should rather be seen as a cultural intermediary (Álvarez). Asín Palacios was to become an academic supporter of the Franco regime in the late 1930s. His argument on Turmeda was largely driven by ideological incentives: his hostility toward the movement of Catalan revival, which heralded Turmeda as a source of cultural pride, and his avowed contempt for the figure of an apostate of the Christian faith. For long accessible only to specialists, the potential Arabic source, the twenty-second epistle (or *The Case of the Animals versus Man*) became available to a wider European readership thanks to a Spanish translation (*La disputa de los animales contra el hombre*, 1984), an English one (*Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. The Case of the Animals versus Man*, 2009), and a French one (*Les Épîtres des Frères en Pureté. Le Procès animal de la domination humaine*, 2021), which help understand its European adaptation.

Turmeda has undoubtedly drawn a general inspiration from this philosophical tale, which stages an island where djinns, oriental geniuses, host wrecked men, who as soon as they arrive start subjugating all the animals of the island. Several animals complain to the king of the djinns that men have no right to do so, but the latter reply with Quranic allegations and various philosophical arguments, which are contradicted by several animal delegates. A trial is organized; after some preliminary exchanges, the advocates of the human cause, from all births (a Greek, a Bedouin, a Hebrew, an Iraqi, a Persian, an Indian, and an Arab from Hedjaz) are confronted with the advocates of the animal cause (the bee, the nightingale, the jackal, the parrot, the nightingale again, the frog, and the nightingale once more), who successfully contradict all arguments in favor of the superiority of humans, except the last one—that God chose to reveal himself to a human prophet, Muhammad—so that the king of djinns finally grants humans the right to put animals at their service. This long and fascinating text was written early in the history of the Muslim world (probably third or fourth century of the Hijra/ninth or tenth century AD), but, without falling into total oblivion, it was

overshadowed later on, for reasons which are well explained by Guillaume de Vaulx d'Arcy in his critical edition (*Ikwān Al-Ṣafā* 70–76): Often considered an emanation of Mu'tazilism, that is, a rationalist movement that distanced itself from literal reading of the Qu'ran, it was considered potentially heretical, especially after the high time of philosophy (*falāsifa*) had passed in the Muslim world. Having animals challenge the superiority of humans may have been as scandalous, to the eyes of Islamic authorities, as it was later for Christian churches.

Turmeda adapted the general frame, and he followed some precise sections of the Arabic dialogue, as Asín Palacios showed. Yet it is not “plagiarism,” a notion completely inadequate to the medieval and Renaissance act of adaptation through *imitatio*. Turmeda adapted his source for a Christian audience, substituting an academic dispute (as it was practiced in the European universities he attended to) for the trial; he simplified the structure, selecting one main animal interlocutor, while he staged himself as contender of the human claims, in a typically late medieval dream-frame; and he excluded exotic species (the jackal, for instance, or the many birds of the Arabic text), focusing on the animals more typical from medieval European bestiaries (the lion, the rabbit, the ass, or the horse and the fox, which play a minor role at the beginning). Instead of Quranic culture, the reader of the *Disputa del ase* can cross quotes from the Bible and elements of Christian theology. Several studies have supported the idea that he actually drew on a wide range of sources, first and foremost European ones (García Sempere): Not only was Turmeda familiar with medieval *isopets*, or little collections of Æsopic fables, but animal speech was a device particularly cultivated by Catalan literature, for instance the *Llibre de les bèsties* by Llull (ca. 1283), or the *Disputació d'en Buch ab son cavall* (“Dispute of the Robber en-Buch with His Horse”) at the end of the fourteenth century (Martín Pascual). Some sections of the Catalan dialogue, dwelling on the properties of certain species and the intelligence made manifest by animal behaviors, obviously draw materials from medieval encyclopedic compilations, such as the *De proprietatibus rebus* by Barthelémy l'Anglais (Bartolomeus Anglicus). And, finally, Turmeda superimposed the Christian theological debate about *dignitas* and *miseria*

*hominis* (which is both naturalistic and metaphysical) on the debate about the legitimacy of man's dominion over animals (a more political and ethical concern that characterized the Arabic source). He thus fused his two cultures in a perfectly hybrid text.

## A Flurry of Paradoxes for the Animals

We know from some records—for example, the catalog of the great library of Fernand Colombus, son of Christopher, where it is mentioned—that the *Disputa del Ase* was printed in Catalan in 1509 in Barcelona. This Catalan original print text, or a Spanish translation of it, is mentioned in the 1583 Quiroga *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. The sole name of a convert to Islam was probably enough to justify the suppression of all copies of the *Disputa del ase* in a post-Tridentine context of strict repression against heresy, which was a major turn in the history of Catholic Europe. Or maybe the Inquisitors were not convinced by the apparent orthodoxy of the end of the dialogue. Pleading for the thesis of animal intelligence and the equal dignity of animals could easily fall into heterodoxy, and even into the categories of materialism and atheism (Vega). The point was regularly made in Christian apologetics, be it Catholic or Protestant (Berriot). This context helps us understand why we have no copy left of the Catalan original (and the Castilian version if there was one). They were probably suppressed.

Conversely, Lyon was in the 1540s a bustling capital of humanist print and a rather free city, where the Reformation had gained some ground, and where heterodox thinkers of all kinds flocked. It was the city of, among others, Rabelais. A lot of precautions were taken in the case of the *Disputation de l'asne*, published by Jaume Jaqui, a Catalan name surrounded by mystery (it is the only known publication from his press), and who might have been the translator (even if this translator complains, in the dedicatory epistle, that the Catalan language is rather “barbaric” and foreign in comparison with the more familiar Castilian). The pseudonym “Enutrof Ensal” at the end of this epistle, an anagram of Lasne Fortune (the “Fortunate Ass,” which remits to the initials G. L. in the heading of the epistle, which may read Guillaume Lasne, William the Ass) sounds jocular but it may also be a foil against

censorship (Turmeda, *Dispute* 41–43). The “Fortunate Ass” is certainly a key, in reference to the vogue of paradoxical praises of the ass, which had started with Cornelius Agrippa’s commendation of the ass in one of the last chapters of his *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum declamatio* (1530). The Milanese writer Ortensio Lando, who was working in the Lyon print edition in the years of the publication of the *Disputa*, had already issued his famous collection of *Paradossi* there, in Italian (1543); he started his paradoxical collection of funeral orations honoring various animals with the praise of poor ass Travaglino (*Sermoni funebri de vari authori nella morte di diverse animali*, 1548). Anton Francesco Doni (or Vincenzo Cartari, the other candidate for the attribution of the work) would publish a couple of years later his *Asinesca gloria*, a prose narrative about his dream metamorphosis into the body of an ass (1552). Niccolò Machiavelli too had begun a satirical poem telling his metamorphosis to an ass, the unfinished *Asino*, written as early as 1517. The next generation pondered the paradoxical thoughts of Erasmus: In her famous declamation, Folly supports the idea that animals are more fortunate than humans, if only because they do not bother themselves with silly questions and live according to the law of nature (*Moriæ encomium*, 1511, §§ XXIV–XXV). Among other literary models alluded to by Folly, three of them are particularly interesting: Apuleius’s *Golden Ass* (edited and commented by Filippo Beroaldo in 1500); Lucian’s *Dream, or the Cock*, edited by Erasmus himself (Lucian gives speech to a rooster that dispels his master’s illusions about wealth and other stupid human wishes); and Plutarch’s *Gryllos*, another particularly appreciated piece of moral literature (which appeared in the Latin translations of Plutarch’s *Moralia*). All three models contributed to nurture the taste for serio-comical literature, both humorous and philosophical, and they could easily be combined through humanist *imitatio* (Correard, “De la prosopopée à l’expérience de pensée”). A fourth model came from a distant land with the *Disputation de l’asne*. Its assimilation would be easy.

The reference to Plutarch is most relevant, as he was known for his plea in favor of what the Latin called *sollertia animalium* (a notion meaning “skills” as well as “intelligence of the animals”), while the Stoics denied it and held the absolute specificity of

*logos* (or *ratio*) as the proper of humankind. For Plutarch, such an idea was an anthropocentric chimera, and even the traditional Aristotelian “scale” of beings, which granted some continuity between the most elementary forms of animality up to humankind but with a clear difference in degrees and a strong ontological hierarchy, had to be reviewed. Plutarch admits that intelligence is less sharp in most animals than in humans, but the behaviors shown by many species in their building homes (like the swallow’s nests), in their stratagems (for instance the fox) and camouflage (the octopus), in their foresight (such as the ants storing grain before the winter), and so on all show that animals are capable of full deliberation and choice. Many examples are reviewed in the dialogue *Whether Land or Sea Animals are Cleverer*. Plutarch also imagines, with the *Gryllos*, a short fiction staging Ulysses back on Circe’s island, asking the magician to restore the human shape of his former companions. One of them rejects the offer, explaining that, having experienced the two conditions, he would rather stay a pig, no less intelligent, but more virtuous and happier than being a man. They break apart, Ulysses having failed to persuade his former companion (and the reader) of the superiority of humankind. Not only does the character of the pig use *logos* but it explains why most of Ulysses’ arguments are pure sophistry.

German humanist and poet Otmar Nachtgall, also known as Luscinius (the “nightingale”), imitated Plutarch in his *Grunnius sophista*, published in Strasbourg in 1522 (see the recent critical edition of Nachtgall, 2025). Instead of Ulysses, he stages a man of letters, Misobarbarus (the one “who hates barbarians” and praises culture), very similar to himself, confronted to a stable pig calling him out. Again, the exchange turns into an *agon*, a real *disputatio* where the reader may first have the impression that Misobarbarus dominates. But in the second part of the dialogue, suggestively subtitled “The Ocean of Human Misery” (*Pelagus humanæ miserie*), Grunnius the Pig takes the upper hand and launches into a devastating *Kulturkritik*: man’s reason is shaky, his faculties uncertain and the knowledge of letters is hardly a relief; his behavior is wicked; he is worn out by anxieties, pains, and finally death. The dialogue ends with Misobarbarus flying away and concluding

that each species has its own scale of value, so that it is pointless to argue. There is no direct connection, apparently, between this *Grunnius* and the *Disputa del ase*, but indeed a parallel structure of disputation. In both cases the author stages himself as the disputant, holding with difficulty the *dignitas hominis* thesis, against an eloquent animal. Later on, as censorial constraints narrowed, the accusation of heterodoxy loomed. In 1537, the *Cymbalum mundi* written in French (and generally attributed to Bonaventure Des Périers), published in Paris and Lyon, staged daring attacks on the clergy, the theologians of all kinds, and religious dogmas. Among various characters, a horse named Phlegon is given speech in dialogue III: Phlegon exposes the violence of his master and suggests that animals ordinarily suffer brutality and injustice from humans, because they lack speech under normal conditions and cannot be understood; in dialogue IV, two dogs talking together deride humans' craving for religious superstitions and the censorial threats that their speech may be subjected to. The text was suppressed: French King Francis I himself gave the order, which is a notable fact considering how rare a direct intervention from a sovereign in a censorial process was. It survived only through three copies. Having animals take part in a dialogue with humans is not only an allegorical device. Exactly as in the cases of the *Disputa* or the *Grunnius sophista*, assumptions about the superiority of humankind are challenged by the talking animals of the *Cymbalum mundi*. The use of animal *prosopopeia* does not necessarily entail antispeciesism or the criticism of anthropocentric beliefs. Yet the association of this literary device with a new world view subverting the hierarchy of the living beings was alluring to heterodox thinkers, and makes the publication of the *Disputation de l'asne* very meaningful.

### Promoting Another *Dignitas*

Indeed, the contents of the *Disputa* are largely dedicated to promote a new vision of the *dignitas animalis* or *animalorum*, a notion we may coin in order to counterbalance the common idea according to which the Renaissance mainly promoted *dignitas hominis*: The dignity of the animal, of various animals, is a key

topic of the dialogue, which revolves around the excellency of many animal behaviors, no more and no less than the misery or glory of humans. Only a partial view would make us miss the real decentering at stake. A quick examination will suffice to show it, and to assess the problem raised by the apparent triumph of man's claims at the end.

The 19 arguments propounded by the character of Anselm, and their refutation by the scruffy ass, might be grouped into several categories. Some are linked to the body of man and aesthetics. Isn't man the most beautiful creature, asks Brother Anselm? The ass answers that animals have their own beauty: The camel's long neck, the elephant's long trunk, the rabbit long ears, for example, however disproportionate in comparison with the rest of their body (according to man's standards), are adapted to their respective needs (arguments 1 and 17). A functionalist conception of the body, in terms of zoology, leads to a relativistic conception of beauty. As for the perceptions, many examples show that other species see, smell, hear, or feel better than men do (argument 2). Some arguments are more intellectual: long catalogs of the skills of animals building their nests or homes, or being capable of automedication or foresight, prove that they do not lack reasoning in comparison with men (arguments 11 and 16). Some are moral or political: Men do form societies, and they abide by laws, argues Brother Anselm, to which the ass replies with the examples of bees, ants, and locusts, or with the fact that, since they follow natural law, beasts do not need the artificial ones that humans strive to settle but ironically seem to breach as soon as they are adopted (arguments 3, 6, and 8). The diversity of human people and languages, praised by Brother Anselm, should rather be seen as a sign of estrangement of humans from the natural order, which prescribes uniformity (argument 9). Other arguments about the superiority of human civilization may sound more exotic than fifteenth- and sixteenth-century topics about *miseria* and *dignitas hominis* in Europe. No less than the former, but more strikingly maybe, they bear the mark of the Arabic source (arguments 4, 5, and 7): Brother Anselm purports that human refinement in cuisine, clothing, or perfumes has no equivalent among beasts; the ass answers that the best human clothes are made with animal

products, while the craving for various foods and perfumes instead testify for man's gluttony and degeneracy (versus the temperance of animals). Another argument was at the center of the twenty-second epistle of the *Ikwān Al-Ṣafā*, and is echoed in the *Disputa*: that humans domesticated several species of animals and take daily care of them—they do it in their own interest, and generally with ill-treatment, answers the ass (argument 10).

The reader may expect religious or theological arguments to be decisive, but this not the case at first. The soul of man is immortal and man was made in the image of God, contends Brother Anselm, to which the ass replies that the difference of humans and animals, in this respect, is far from being granted if one proceeds to an unbiased reading of the Scriptures (arguments 13 and 14). Anthropomorphic representations of the divine are openly called into question. And if some men were granted the gift of prophecy, this is also the case for some animals, from Balaam's ass to the ass of the *Disputa* (argument 18), who launches into a long verse prophecy, made of 70 quatrains. This digressive section enjoyed a special fate, circulating autonomously from the fifteenth century onwards, so that it is the only part of the *Disputa del ase* we know in Catalan from Turmeda's original text. As we can see, the *Disputa* is full of surprises and digressions. The lengthiest one occurs with argument 15, obviously a facetious one: While Brother Anselm holds that the existence of monastic orders should be considered an argument per se of the excellency of humans, the ass tells a series of anecdotes illustrating how the behaviors of debauched clerics can illustrate the seven deadly sins! Most of them take the form of short stories in the manner of Boccaccio's *novelle* or Poggio's *facetiae*, but many of them are situated in places that Turmeda knew well in Catalonia, and they may be laden with autobiographical memories. A defrocked Franciscan monk, Turmeda indulged in ferociously anticlerical tales, an aspect that may well have pleased the readership of the French adaptation of 1544.

The *Disputa* is an amusing text, if only because it is a parody of scholastic *disputatio*, but its philosophical effect depends on the sense of relativity triggered by laughter. High and low are spectacularly reversed in a passage where the ass lets a series of insects directly answer to Anselm's arguments that men's eminent



*dignitas* is proven by their de facto power over the animals they eat. The one who eats is superior to the one who is eaten, as argument 12 bluntly puts it. Then a simple worm would be superior to man, because worms and various parasites do eat men, answers the ass (which may remind the reader of Hamlet's obsession with worms and maggots eating kings: *Hamlet*, IV, iii, vv. 20–35). The fly testifies that it can bother kings, emperors and popes, even defecating in their beard—this is why they can smell so bad! The repeated use of the verb *chier* (to shit) gives the French text a distinct Rabelaisian flavor (Turmeda, *Dispute* 83). Then comes the mosquito, which can indefinitely torment the sleeper in his bedroom. And then the bedbug, the lice, the flea, the itch-mite, which all feed on human bodies, and finally the “*vers des dents maschelières*” (the microscopic worm that was believed to cause dental carries). This last parasite apostrophizes Anselm ad hominem, reminding him of the tooth he lost the year before, how few are left in his mouth, and how painful it is to try to masticate meats without really being able to do so. “Sovereignty” belongs to the parasite, concludes the dental worm: “Therefore we stand with higher dignity and nobility than you.”<sup>4</sup> At this point, Brother Anselm admits that he was more troubled than ever, knowing how much these arguments are true (Turmeda, *Dispute* 86–87).

Interestingly, the choice of an ass as the main interlocutor may derive from a brief passage of the Arabic source (a mule is the first respondent to men's claim in the court of the djinns), but it was also a perfectly ambivalent symbol for a European readership, and a good indication of the paradoxical and serio-ludic nature of the dialogue: stupid or wise; renegade when it is free, or meek and submitted when it bears the yoke; pagan and deeply Christian (because of Balaam's ass, but also because of the association of Christ and his disciples with asses); burlesque but philosophical (Socrates frequently talked about asses and trifles, according to Plato's *Symposium*, 221d–e). Turmeda fully exploited this ambivalence, long before Giordano Bruno, the heterodox philosopher who made the animal his avatar in his 1583 *Asino cyllenico* (Ordine). In any case, Turmeda's ass is always master of his own reasoning, rivaling with Brother Anselm as if he were not an antagonist but a double (another part of Turmeda, the writer in dialogue with himself). Where did the Catalan author head for?

The dispute ends with the argument that the Word became flesh (John 1:14), but not any kind of flesh: Jesus (not an ass or another animal) was God incarnate. The ass abides with the point, recognizing Anselm's victory. Argument 19 is the shortest, hardly elaborated, ending the dialogue *ex abrupto*, where it had to end if the intention was to have it circulate on Christian soil. Clearly, it would have been impossible otherwise. The final reversal was extremely common in Renaissance paradoxical literature, as we can see by Ortensio Lando's *Paradossi*, or later on with Montaigne. When humanist writers developed heterodox theses, they would shift the gear at some point and go in the other direction (the orthodox one), though less convincingly. Turmeda (or his French translator, because we cannot know exactly what part he played) may have practiced this art of *palinodia*. This unfolding truly corresponds to the end of the twenty-second epistle of the Brothers in Purity, christening the idea of a transcendent foundation of man's divine vocation. Yet a major contradiction looms, not only because Turmeda was supposedly converted to Islam when he wrote the dialogue.

Whether he really authored the *Tuhfa* or not (which deems the dogma of incarnation an absurdity), there is an internal contradiction in the *Disputa del ase*, which calls for interpretation: the answers of the ass to arguments 9 and 14, which both rely on the assumption that man is made in the image of God. The talking beast, obviously Turmeda's mouthpiece at this point, insists that it would be ridiculous to believe that God could have a head, some eyes, a mouth, hands, and feet. God is not flesh, holds the ass, who pokes fun at the workings of the imagination or "fantasy" (*fantaisie*), making anthropocentrism the root of the degeneration of religion into superstition (Turmeda, *Dispute* 77–78; 89). No wonder such a text could please humanist intellectuals prone to Reformation, particularly Erasmian ones, while it would sound dangerous to the eyes of Inquisitors. But its unsettling power went far beyond what most Christian intellectuals could tolerate. Whether the ending is ironical or not—some critics intuit that it may be open to a double reading, Christian or Muslim (Alemany, "Turmeda/Abdallà o el perspectivisme"; Martos)—it does question the link between anthropocentrism and religious beliefs, and incidentally the very nature of God. Turmeda's views, linked to his

experience as a convert, anticipates the sixteenth-century outbreak of (religious) skepticism.

### Toward an Intersectional Renaissance

It is no wonder that the reception of this dialogue left few traces, and that its destiny was rather tormented. Its potential impact should not be overstated (as it is by Tornero Poveda, according to us): Neither Erasmus nor Montaigne seems to have read it, despite some similarities in the ideas displayed against the confident belief in man's superiority. There is a more concrete hint that Pico della Mirandola read Turmeda. At the very beginning of his *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, he mentions a Muslim writer known as "Abdalah the Saracen," who would have held that man is the most honorable spectacle on earth (with weak arguments, according to Pico). Was this Abdalah our "Abdalah-al-Tardjuman," that is, Turmeda? It is possible.<sup>5</sup> But there are more cogent examples of influence on several dialogues between man and animal that seem to reproduce some features of the *Disputa del ase*, which is not really the case with *Grunnius sophista* or *Cymbalum mundi*, two examples we mentioned above for their general similarities, both structurally and thematically, with no clear sign of an influence.

The lost Catalan and Spanish versions may have had an early influence on Iberic literature, as we can surmise by the case of a text known as *Coloquio del mosquito* (1520) by the Castilian humanist Hernán López de Yanguas (the real title reads: *Diálogo muy útil y no menos deletable en el qual solamente hablan por ficción el auctor y un mosquito*). A typical Spanish Erasmian of his generation, Yanguas was also the first translator of the *Moriae encomium* in his language. In the verse dialogue of the *Coloquio del mosquito*, he staged himself daydreaming, somewhere in the countryside, about the superiority of man (a setting similar to Turmeda's). The way the poet flaunts himself with this idea bears an ironic overtone, confirmed by the margins of the original edition, which pinpoint the "pride" (*orgullo*) of the character:

Pondering the excellency  
That God granted to man,

Enjoying superior knowledge  
 And a special doctrine,  
 Full of this eminence,  
 I started boasting  
 That God was pleased to create  
 Me a Man, and not a brute.<sup>6</sup> (Yanguas vv. 25–32)

A simple mosquito will deflate such vainglorious claims, stinging the poet who scratches himself and engages in a fight he cannot win. The parody of epics is followed by a formal *disputa*. “Yo soy hombre,” proudly repeats the poet, who nevertheless fails to prove the superiority of man. There are some classic sources (Plutarch again, or the poem known as the pseudo-Virgil’s *Culex*), but the blend of aesthetical, moral, intellectual and theological arguments is reminiscent of Turmeda’s dialogue, besides the self-derisory staging of the author as contender of a *doxa* contradicted by a simple bug (as in the answer to Brother Anselm’s twelfth argument, in the passage highlighted above). The mosquito denies it is less “perfect” than any other being, his light wings enabling him to wander freely wherever man cannot go. Knowledge acquired in the best universities built by men equals to nought, according to the mosquito. The insect is content with what nature gives; it will not wage wars, trade money, and so on. Moreover, man’s yoke on other living beings is nothing but a usurpation, an argument that strongly recalls Turmeda’s *Disputa*. The dialogue ends with the mosquito leaving Yanguas deeply troubled by the insect’s sermon: “remember that you are dust” (“Cognosce quia cini es”), warns the mosquito before parting. The most surprising aspect of this text is that the mosquito has systematically denied biblical *loci communes* about the superiority of man, adding that it does not care a jot about the alleged immortality of the soul.

Of more importance is Giovan Battista Gelli’s *Circe* (1548), the most ambitious dialogue staging animals in the Renaissance, and one of the most important pieces of literature on the *miseria* and *dignitas hominis* debate. It may be described as a direct imitation from Plutarch’s *Gryllos* but, instead of a pig, Ulysses tries to convince no fewer than 11 former companions to return to their original human shape: the oyster and the mole, the snake, the hare, the goat, the deer, the lion, the horse, the dog, the calf and

the elephant. This major *amplificatio* of the Greek model nevertheless ends differently: the elephant, who used to be a philosopher when he was a man, lets himself be convinced by the idea that humans enjoy the privilege of the immortality of the soul and the contemplation of God. He asks Circe to metamorphize him back into human. The crisscrossed organization of the debate, which gives the primacy to the animal views on the misery of man during the first nine dialogues, defeating Ulysses's arguments, while the last one finally restores an orthodox Christian (and Neoplatonic) vision, seems reminiscent of the *Disputa del ase*, and raises the same interpretative problems. Considering Gelli's connection to the French publications in Lyon at the end of the 1540s (confirmed by another dialogue from his pen, the *Capricci del bottaio*), it is not impossible that he had heard of Turmeda's dialogue, even if he had simply not read it.

The first debate of the *Circe*, between Ulysses and an oyster, is evocative of the first arguments of the *Disputa del ase*. The humble animal denies that man's body is superior: The oyster's lack of limbs is not a problem, as it does not need to change place, unlike hectic humans. The superiority of civilization (clothing, construction works, etc.) is but a costly illusion, animals having everything they need naturally and effortlessly (Gelli 74–90). Any idea of ontological superiority of one species over another collapses. It is hard to prove an influence elsewhere, because the intricacy of moral and intellectual arguments for or against the supremacy of man is characteristic both of Turmeda's text and Plutarch's *Gryllos*, obviously the main source of Gelli. But the development of a long series of arguments, one after another, is also a striking parallel. And there is one concern that the Italian writer shared with his Catalan forerunner: the systematic questioning of the legitimacy of domination. This applies to the domination of the humans on some animal species, but also to the domination of nobles and the rich ones on ordinary people, many animal interlocutors of the *Circe* pointing that social inequalities have no equivalent in other species, as if enslaving one's kin was the proper preserve of man, and finally it applies to the domination of men on (human) females, which again has no equivalent in nature, a scandal exposed by the character of the deer in the fifth dialogue (Gelli 210–39). While the renegade Catalan had developed

a particular sensibility to relativism thanks to his radical intercultural and interconfessional experience, Gelli had a sharp sensibility to injustice because of his origins. The son of a winemaker and a sock maker (*calzaio*) who himself was educated as an artisan, he challenged all kinds of alleged superiorities or de facto oppressions, depriving them of their intellectual and metaphysical justifications. The grievances of the humbles, the females and the animals echo each other, shaking accepted norms. No more than in the case of the *Disputa*, the ending should mislead us: The real aim of the dialogue is to make the reader hear voices usually unheard. It is about intersectional awakening. And, contrary to the *Disputa del ase*, the *Circe* had a notable influence during at least two centuries, enjoying translations and imitations in several languages, particularly in France and in England.

A last example is the *Endecálogo contra la Antoniana Margarita* (1556) by the Spanish scholar Francisco de Sosa, published in Medina de Campos, near Salamanca. The famous university had been the stage of a controversy sparked by the publication by physician Antonio Gómez Pereira in 1554 of the *Antoniana Margarita*, a treatise of natural philosophy that concluded that animals have neither thought nor sensation, because if we grant them sensation we would be obliged to grant them simple thoughts, then complex thoughts that necessarily result from simple ones, and finally the immortality of the soul. This proto-Cartesian thesis of *animal-machine* prompted an infuriated answer by Miguel de Palacio, a more orthodox Aristotelian scholar. The campaign was prolonged by Sosa's *Endecálogo*, a series of 11 dialogues written against Gómez Pereira. An assembly of animals discuss under the patronage of Jupiter and Mercury his scandalous ideas. The ape, the bat, the crocodile, the lion, the eagle, the whale, the wolf, and the elephant all indict Gómez Pereira, while the god Momus is sent to the earth by Jupiter in order to check that animals do have deliberate reasoning, a fact confirmed by Momus, who transformed himself into a fox, and thus experienced animal life. Many ancient writers, such as Pliny, Lucian, and Plutarch again, lie in the background, but the overall frame of the trial of human prejudices by an assembly of animals is reminiscent both of the *Disputa del Ase* and of the Arabic model of the twenty-second epistle of the Brothers in Purity. Sosa may have read a copy of the *Disputa* before

it was censored in the Iberic peninsula. Again, the point is about imagining what the living beings would tell us—had we access to their language—about our assumptions, which often wrong them, and deprive them of the status of sentient and thinking beings.

## Conclusion: Animals as Literary Subjects

There is no compelling reason to think that Montaigne had read Turmeda's text. He would not stage an animal dialogue, even if he did use literary *prosopopeia* in the "Apologie," imagining the speech of a baby goose, or gosling (*oison*), thinking itself the center of the world and believing that the farmer was created for his pleasure (*Essayes* 244). Ironically, Montaigne stops arguing against the boasted *dignitas hominis*, and rather offers a parody of anthropocentric discourse in this passage. The whole literature of animal *prosopopeia*, which was bustling in the decades following the publication of Erasmus's *Moriæ encomium*, had been struck by the censorship set up by Catholic Reformation (or Counter-Reformation), while Protestant countries were no favorable ground for this kind of sophisticated literary device, nor for questioning the tenets of biblical anthropocentrism. But there *had* been another humanism, which had made animals the subjects and not just objects of thoughts. Animal upheavals are no allegory, or not only allegories in the text we dealt with (even when they hide other political agendas or moral issues). Resorting to literary fiction was a radical way of decentering the reader's imagination and to trespass the limits of human language and representations: What would they tell us, if we could understand them? This is the question that Turmeda, probably challenged by the reading of the *Ikwān Al-Ṣafā*, raised in his *Disputa del ase*, and this is also the question that attracted the attention of the 1544 editors.

Many of the texts that we now deem marginal, relying on a selective and biased intellectual history, may have raised more interest in their time than is generally thought. The various examples of dialogues pitting one representant of the humankind against the voice of one or several dissenting animals show that it was a fashionable trend among humanists, and one of the high roads to discuss the *miseria* and *dignitas hominis* topic, before

this type of creativity, verging on heterodoxy, was quenched. The severe repression striking the available versions of the *Disputa del ase*, no less than the French *Cymbalum mundi* (which offers an interesting point of comparison), shows that they were popular, and taken very seriously by their censors. This is why they almost disappeared. In the case of Gelli's *Circe*, we are confronted to an even more surprising phenomenon: a text that escaped censorship because it conspicuously gave the prize to the thesis of *dignitas hominis*—sincere or not, this unfolding may have been an opportune imitation of the end of the *Disputa del ase* (Gelli being no apostate, he was less suspect of manipulation than Turmeda)—and which was frequently reedited, translated, and imitated by authors such as Jean de La Fontaine in France (“Les Compagnons d’Ulysse,” *Fables*, XII, 1). But it was hardly considered significant by Renaissance historiography and criticism.

Maybe it did not match the general picture of what *we* call *humanism*, assuming after Burckhardt and Kristeller that the praise of *dignitas hominis* was hegemonic among Renaissance intellectuals—a debatable premise, considering the strength of the countercurrent arguing for the reality of *miseria hominis*, or the fact that most authors, such as Turmeda and those we reviewed, probably oscillated between the two stances. It is even more debatable if we consider the long-obscured emergence of a radical valorization of animality as such (Correard, “‘Humanisme’, ou animalisme?”). From Turmeda to Montaigne, we may rather call the Renaissance the time when the place of man in the world had become a problem.

## Endnotes

1. “Qu’il me face entendre par l’effort de son discours, sur quels fondemens il a basti ces grands avantages, qu’il pense avoir sur les autres creatures. [...] Est-il possible de rien imaginer si ridicule, que ceste miserable et chetive creature, qui n’est pas seulement maistresse de soy [...] se die maistresse et emperiere de l’univers ?” (Montaigne, *Essais*, 450 [A]).

2. Anselm Turmeda, *Dispute de l’âne* (1984). All quotes below refer to this edition. Translations into English are mine.



3. The notion of “parody” (put forward by Alemany, “La parodia en la *Disputa*”) is no more convincing.
4. “Et par consequent, sommes de plus grande noblesse et dignité que vous.”
5. Even the best scholarly editions offer few clues about the identity under this Arab name (Cassirer et al. 223; Pico 3). The suggestion that he may be a companion or cousin of Mahomet (several bear the name of Abdalah) hardly makes sense, while Pico obviously refers to an author.
6. “Contemplando en la excelencia / Que al hombre Dios quiso dar, / Y en el saber y excelencia / Y doctrina singular, / Con tan sobrada eminencia, / Yo comencé de jactarme / Porque Dios quiso criarme / Hombre y no bruto animal” (my translation).

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## 4. The Queen's Embodiment of Concord in the Shadow of Religious Wars

Anna Carlstedt

### Summary

When horizons darkened in early modern France under the clouds of religious conflict and persecutions, royal authority was threatened. The fact that the crown finally managed to emerge from the maelstrom of civil wars should partly be credited to the diplomatic strategies of Catherine de' Medici—the queen who married one king, became mother of three others, and ruled France herself for several periods. This chapter explores her search for a position as a sovereign subject and her embodiment of humanism and Neoplatonism—philosophies relatively new to France—through her role as an eminent arbiter of concord and justice.

### Introduction

During the 1560s, civil wars between Catholics and Protestants prevailed in France. It was crucial for King Charles IX in his attempts to save his wounded kingdom that he manifested power of action and unity, both religious and civic, a power believed to be intentioned by God. Unfortunately, this weak and adolescent king was not, by any means, up for this challenge, which required the multiple strengths of a Hercules.

Therefore, the task of embodying true royal power—also physically—fell heavily on his mother, Catherine de' Medici. As shown in this chapter, however, she would not only safeguard the strength of the monarchy but also uphold a policy of concord and coexistence. The queen would, especially through her diplomatic

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strategies, make it possible to imagine a religious coexistence of orthodoxies guaranteed by royal law, despite the precarious situation of her country. Furthermore, the queen would (re)shape the newborn concept of a (Renaissance) humanism, not least by implementing her own interpretation of Florentine Neoplatonic ideas. This process would also interact with the period's dominating perceptions regarding the subjectivation of bodies, manifested by the physical appearance of Catherine de' Medici—"Mother and Teacher of France."

Would it be possible to discover, with the ruling queen, another sense of humanism? She was not the only one representing a pragmatic form of humanism, recognizing the importance of diplomacy, religious tolerance, and the cultivation of virtue as instruments for peace and stability—maintained also amid chaos. Catherine de' Medici was instead positioning herself in a long Neoplatonic world view. Thus, by constantly underpinning the efforts to foster harmony—concord—even during the religious conflicts, perhaps she was bringing her own element: Through her political approach of moderation, positioning herself as the mediator embodying divine order, her aim was not necessarily to conquer the enemies but to reconcile factions. This policy contrasts with the strategies of the powerful Guise family, who instead procured the necessity to "purify" the whole society and to "eliminate" the heretics, claiming violence being justified, even wanted by God, to restore purity and to uphold a glorious Renaissance humanism.

Catherine de' Medici became an important ruler in her own capacity during the early modern religious wars. During her upbringing, on the other hand, she was solely regarded as an object, lacking the possibility to express a will of her own. She did not yet exist as an "I," since as a child and as an adolescent Catherine was only considered someone akin to a chess piece on the European game board, being as far from any subject position as anyone could be. It would take her more than half a century to become a truly powerful subject in her own capacity.

Catherine was born into the powerful and wealthy Medici family in Florence in 1519 and given the name Caterina Maria Romula de' Medici. Her father was Lorenzo de' Medici, the man to whom Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) chose to dedicate his famous book *The Prince*.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

**Figure 4.1.** Engraving. Portrait of Catherine de' Medici (1519–1589), by François Clouet (vers 1516–1572). Public domain, reproduced with permission from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Her mother, Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne, was of French royal blood. When she married Lorenzo de' Medici, the ceremony was hosted by the French king, Francis I. There were high hopes that Catherine's parents, the it-couple of their times, would bring prosperity to both families—and to both states. As soon as they had tied the hymen, it turned out that the young bride was pregnant. Most unfortunately, the goddess Atropos seems to have decided shortly after to cut the young couple's thread of life. Madeleine and Lorenzo both died just after Catherine's birth (the cause of death possibly being syphilis, in combination with tuberculosis). The task of caring for the little girl was then trusted to an uncle, Giovanni of Medici, a quite busy man appointed pope a few years earlier. Leo X, as his title went, and France's then king Francis agreed to protect the newborn child, and to consider her

a potential asset to keep for the future. This future soon turned out to darken (at least in their opinion), as the Reformation was spreading like a wildfire all over Europe. Hence, the pope needed France as a strong, reliable ally in the fight against heresy. As for Francis I, he was not only up to defending the Catholic Church by all means but also constantly interested in expanding on the Italian peninsula. At this point, he had his mind set particularly on Milan and, hence, a treaty with the pope came in handy.

Little Catherine, one of the most important heiresses of the Medici clan and of her time, should thus be kept alive and well, so that she could be as valuable as possible. When she turned 14, it was time to export this object of strategic importance to France. Francis I and Leo X decided that she should marry the king's son Henry. At the wedding, officiated by her uncle the pope, Catherine was—literally—weighed down by the Medici family's desirable jewels, being part of her imposing dowry.

Sadly enough, clouds were soon gathering above her. The pope died, which meant that the strings to the Medici clan weakened considerably. Even worse, 10 years of marriage then went by without Catherine fulfilling her only truly important task—to produce an heir. As time went by, the once so promising object from Florence became next to worthless. Henry, at this time becoming King Henry II, was reportedly considering how to copy the strategy of his English neighbor, Henry VIII, who repeatedly divorced or killed his wives who were not producing any male heirs. Luckily, literally under the gallows, Catherine suddenly started delivering. From the age of 25, between 1544 and 1556, she gave Henry and France 10 children, of whom seven survived their infancy. Among them: three kings.

## **Becoming a Subject**

After her husband's violent death in a tournament in 1559, Catherine gradually began to exercise a decisive and constantly increasing influence. Only as a widow and mother of kings did she gain the freedom to exert control over her own actions and beliefs, developing her identity as a ruler. Of course, her political decision-making was still mostly enforced in the name of her

sons. All three of them died young, and Catherine undoubtedly became the one who needed to embody the monarchy's continuity and stability. Her first born, crowned Francis II, died at 16. Charles IX, his younger brother, died at 24 (both from illness) and Henry III was murdered at the age of 38. For decades, she was the formal or informal regent of France. The policies of the French monarchy were, to a large extent, products of the cooperation between the queen and Michel de l'Hospital, the extremely influential chancellor by her side.

Until recently, however, Catherine de' Medici has not mainly been remembered for her political achievements. On the contrary, legend often describes her as the "Black Widow," "the Machiavellian Queen mother," or the "serpent from the grave of Italy." Some historians are still repeating that she alone ordered the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, where thousands of Huguenots (Protestants) were killed in Paris. Research is still not in agreement on the responsibility of the royal family and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, and we will come back to this topic. At the same time, more recent research shows that Catherine de' Medici and de l'Hospital tried—for many years and by all means—to prevent such a disaster, and instead defend a policy of tolerance and harmony, both religious and civic. With reference to this recent research, French historian Jérémie Foa writes:

Denis Crouzet showed that Catherine de' Medici, despite the lies of her detractors, was the opposite of an abusive and bloodthirsty matron: Convinced that only dialogue offered a credible alternative to war, she worked almost all her life in favor of peace. Many historians have pointed to responsibilities other than that of the Queen Mother: thus, Jean-Louis Bourgeon established the weight of international interference and Barbara Diefendorf proved the decisive role of the Parisian militia in the massacre. (Foa 7)<sup>1</sup>

During the 1560s, the decade preceding the massacre, France suffered from dramatically increasing tensions. Denis Crouzet, mentioned by Foa above, has shown how the monarchy at this time, facing all the religious antagonisms and their conflicting impulses, desperately tried to uphold concord and to avoid full-scale civil war. The strategy included the promulgation of a



number of treaties, aiming at calming the conflicts between zealous Catholics on the one hand and Lutheran Protestants on the other. In addition to the political decision-making aiming to avoid civil war, an extensive propaganda machine is required to support and legitimize all the various treaties—mainly put in place by the king's mother, Catherine, and Michel de l'Hospital. In this propaganda, allusions to ancient mythology were important ingredients. The monarch was expected to be portrayed as a powerful Greek or Roman hero, capable of saving his kingdom from all conceivable perils. The monarchy needed to show strength, but also tolerance, to achieve the love and concord intensioned by God. Additionally, Crouzet points out how the figure of Hercules, preferably carrying the torch of enlightenment, gained popularity in this context. Embodying the Herculean powers, the sovereign could be considered holder of absolute authority, but also of grace, transcending all the futile, human antagonisms. Crouzet notes that the torch:

is a symbolic light of the Logos which, secretly interiorized by the Christian, allows him to maintain himself in an invisible and confident faith in divine love despite all the threats that may arise. Tolerance and dissimulation appear as synonyms in a movement of adherence to divine love. We then observe that French royalty [...] appropriated the language and the code of this *Tolerantia* [...] It would be the king who would conceal within himself the secret of a policy attempting to join the divine will in the hidden practice of a dissimulation or a simulation which would also be synonymous with a love willed by God. (Crouzet, *Genèses* 1)<sup>2</sup>

Crouzet refers to one engraving in particular: the famous one by Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert, which became very popular at the time and widely disseminated in pamphlets by the monarchy—presenting itself as a Herculean force. Of course, the monarchy and the king are as one, impossible to separate from each other.

The problem is that it must have been next to impossible for anyone who met the king, or who knew anything about him, to be able to associate the king with this Hercules. At this point (during the early 1560s), the young Charles IX had just become a teenager. He was sickly, fragile—and utterly uninterested in governing his country. King Charles was keener on playing with his parrots and

with his cherished “favorite boys” at court. Decision-making and paperwork bored him, giving him severe headaches.

In light of this troubled period, how would it be possible at all for this young boy to embody the expected and necessary kingly power? One possible answer discussed by Véronique Montagne is that the only way forward for the king's mother, Catherine, and the chancellor, de l'Hospital, must have been to stage the entire project of showing strength and tolerance—in the king's name. In addition to this discussion, I would like to stress the fact that in order to carry the Herculean torch as described by Crouzet (*Genèses* 1), and to take on the responsibility of saving France, Catherine de' Medici needed to transform herself—from an object into a subject, and a very powerful one as well. The numerous treaties she was negotiating, after her husband's sudden and unfortunate death in 1559, were an important part of this process. Through them, she strengthened the monarchy and her own position. Furthermore, she did it her own way, being a Medici brought up in the very cradle of Renaissance philosophy. Through her writing, for example in her vast correspondence, we can follow how the deeply educated queen was merging (Florentine) Neoplatonic ideas of harmony and concord with the diplomatic strategies of Michel de l'Hospital.<sup>3</sup> Together, they were combining humanism and pragmatism, making it possible to imagine (at least) a religious coexistence, guaranteed by royal law—and, therefore, God's law. De l'Hospital wrote, about the king, that he was a good ruler, a wise prince, who has tolerated and permitted religions that is not his own (Belloy).

In his speech in December 1560, de l'Hospital said: “Let us avoid those diabolic words that divide, tear us apart and seduce—*luthériens*, *huguenots* papists. Let us not change the name Christian” (87). But this appeal for tolerance soon revealed itself as highly limited and conditional. Montagne notes:

Like Jérémy Foa, we can only underline the “contradiction between the universalist claims of the edicts and their contribution to Catholic domination” or, in this case, the contradiction between an aspiration—certainly nascent—for peaceful cohabitation between different confessions, and its evaluative and therefore denominative reflexes. From this, it naturally emerges that

the meaning of the word “tolerance” must still be related to the meaning of its etymon, with this pragmatic seme which is added to it in this political-religious context: it is a question of tolerating, but aiming to obtain appeasement which the French State cannot do without. (Montagne 43)<sup>4</sup>

In the attempt to avoid civil war, Catherine de’ Medici and Michel de L’Hospital were changing the order of their priorities: Civil peace, necessary for the restoration of the authority of the state, came—at this point—before the objective of religious unity. They resigned themselves to a provisional solution of civil tolerance, promoted through propaganda and the treatises and by bringing theologians together from both factions. In the name of the king, now 11 years old, his mother and her chancellor decided to arrange the Colloquy of Poissy in 1561. The assembly summoned 40 prominent Catholic prelates (including the cardinals of Tournon and Lorraine) and 12 Protestant delegates led by Théodore de Bèze. By this colloquium, the queen hoped to soothe the general unrest and to control the increasing power of the extremely influential Guise family. The venue of the colloquium—a large, rectangular room being the refectory of the priory of Saint-Louis de Poissy—was carefully chosen. This beautiful hall can be described as huge and bright, with exquisite windows and surrounded by landscaped terraces.

It was important to document the meeting as a demonstration of the monarchy’s power and pragmatism both in writing and in art. In a contemporary engraving, we can see the delegates so clearly that several of them can still be identified. We can see the group of Protestants in the foreground. Théodore de Bèze, raising his right hand, is the main speaker. The scene is ambiguous. On the one hand, the Huguenots are in a state of precariousness: Standing with their backs to the spectator, behind a railing, they are in the position of being accused—and surrounded by guards. On the other hand, we know from contemporary accounts that the reformed representatives received a favorable welcome on their arrival.

In the engraving above—*Le colloque de Poissy* by Tortorel and Perrissin, ca. 1570—the king is marked “A” and his mother “B.” The outcome of the meeting’s negotiations was ambiguous.

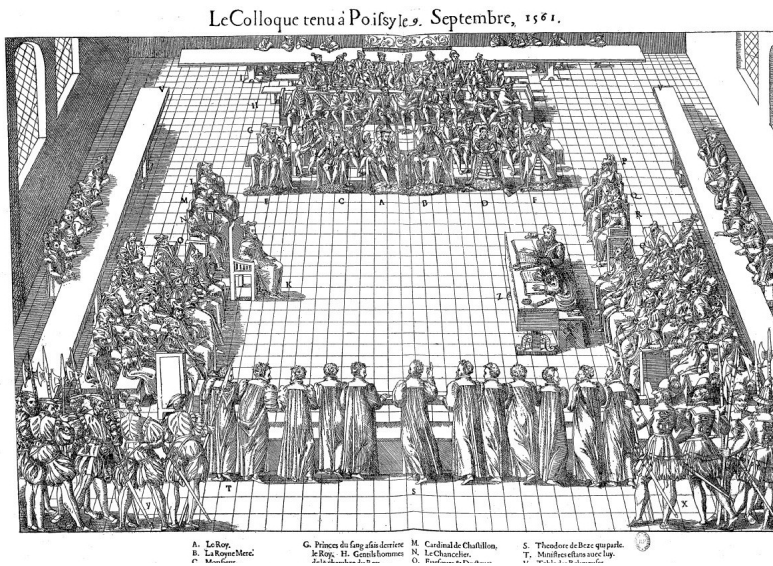


**Figure 4.2.** Engraving announcing “Le colloque de Poissy”, by Tortorel and Perrissin, ca 1570. In the engraving, the King is marked “A” and his mother “B”. Public domain, reproduced with permission from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Nevertheless, as a direct result of the conference, the Edict (treaty) of January 1562 established a (short) period of tolerance in France. In this treaty, Catherine de’ Medici—advised to do so by de L’Hospital—officially recognized the rights of Lutherans to gather and to hold services, if they did so discretely and in the outskirts of towns/in the countryside. The treaty ends with the words: “the tolerance of the exercise of two religions by our provisional edict made on January 17 oud. Year M VCLXI [1562]” (qtd. in Crouzet, *Genèses* 16).

### Ambiguous Politics

Officially, all the treatises created by the queen and the chancellor are works of the king. The treaty of January 1562 expressed that both religions can be tolerated—provisionally and under certain circumstances. The official motto chosen for Charles IX is *justitia et sapientia*. The king’s law might support the unbearable, in

order to prevent God from being offended by horrible violence created, when faith is imposed by force. As Crouzet has pointed out, if Catherine and de l'Hospital were procuring concord and reconciliation, the Guise faction was calling for a necessary holy war, aiming to terminate all heretics:

Each faction, in the time of religious wars, had to create its own "benchmarks", its specific symbolism, in order to place the violence in a context where it was claimed to be expected by God. There was what we can call a "staging" of the actors of the conflicts, which can be spontaneous or programmed, in an almost scenographic way. Thus, violence and war could be justified as necessary, since this was willed by God. (Crouzet, *Dieu en guerre* 287)<sup>5</sup>

In many cases, the Lutherans were just as fanatic, proclaiming violence. Against the violence of both the "Huguenots" and the "Papists," the humanism of Catherine de' Medici and de L'Hospital imagined, at this point, the possibility of a religious coexistence guaranteed by royal law, making the sovereign the holder of an absolute authority—transcending confessional antagonisms. When the treaty of 1562 was created, they were still insisting on the king as the conservator of civil peace. The king was expected to exercise a mission that does not involve the empowerment of politics as much as the empowerment of God's will.

The beating heart of this crucial peace treaty signed in Saint Germain in January 1562 was Catherine's, embodying the strength—and the fertility—of the French royal blood. Her benevolent, clement, and feminine power was opposed to the vengeful, divisive masculinity of the Guise ultra-Catholics. Her main virtues were prudence and moderation—combined with a God-given authority.

The efforts made by the queen and the chancellor to avoid war are shown in writing but also in art. When the treaty was signed, it was celebrated by Catherine by having a series of enamel portraits made. In them, we can recognize her own process of acquiring a subject position, as she was facing the complexity of her authority. On one hand, her absolute ambition was to safeguard peace. On the other hand, should war become necessary, her propaganda

machinery demonstrated her capacity to shoulder whatever situation that may occur. Her government was exercised as mother of a child-king, meaning that she needed to turn what appeared to be weaknesses in a male world into strengths.

On one of the plaques ordered, the king appears in the guise of Mars, the god of war, wielding a shield and sword.<sup>6</sup> He is carried in a chariot, drawn by wolves—the sacred animals of Mars. Behind him, we can see a war-ravaged land unfold. If we look carefully, we can identify some people on the bottom suffering the effects of war. King Charles is depicted as a grown man, but he is still only 12 years old. On a pendant plaque, Catherine appears as Juno, wife of Jupiter and the mother of Mars. She wears a veil, is holding a scepter and her chariot is pulled by peacocks. Above her, a rainbow is arching a colorful landscape in peace.

## The Queen at War

Despite all efforts, civil war broke out, since the Catholic factions did not accept the Edict of January 1562. As early as March of the same year, the massacre of Vassy was the first major catastrophe of the French wars of religion. In an armed attack organized by Francis, Duke of Guise, hundreds of Huguenot worshippers and citizens were murdered in Vassy. Between 1562 and 1598, millions of people died from violence, disease, and famine caused by the civil wars between Catholics and Protestants. The queen, who had hoped to maintain the peace and order making concessions to Huguenots, realized that she needed to harden her stance, since the authority of the monarchy was now severely threatened. She was preparing to do anything in her power to save the last heirs of the throne of the house of Valois, and the monarchy per se. This brings us to the “paradox policy” of the queen. It is with regard to the context that she had to change course at the time of the treaty of 1562, when she had to enter another field of political rationality, where she empirically defined politics as a learning and practice of difference, as work on a changing world, work on the “malice of the times”—hence an ability to rethink decisions based on the present and its consequences. The imagination of action, apart from the fact that it had to give honor to a God

of peace, is an art of adaptation to circumstances, to “occasions.” It shows the flexibility of the ruler in the face of facts and men, when priority is to preserve peace. Queen of concord, she had only one “obsession”: trying to hinder the unleashing of the forces of passion, to the point of resorting to the instrument of murder and massacre when history seemed—to her—to be closing in on itself. Unfortunately, when the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre unfolded, this vision of a possible royal peace seemed more like a utopia. The queen however did show awareness of this paradox, which would characterize a refusal of religious conflict. A paradoxical consciousness indeed, since the “obsession” of peace went as far as to integrate the potentiality... of violence.

The works of art commissioned at this time, with the monarchy going to war, play on this ambiguity and dichotomy that characterized the queen’s rule: She favored peace, but when war became necessary the royal family would manage this too—with her at the helm.

To let oneself be presented in art as a hero from Greek/Roman mythology has long been an indispensable part of every princely house’s political propaganda machinery. In the seventeenth century, the Swedish Queen Christina of Sweden had herself portrayed as Pallas Athena/Minerva, goddess of the art of war, complete with a breastplate, staff, and helmet. In England, which was ruled by Elizabeth I (1533–1603) for 45 years, the regent herself liked to see her portrayed as Artemis/Diana: the goddess of hunting and chastity. A fitting role model for this powerful ruler, who declared herself being “wedded to England,” who defeated the Spanish Armada and managed—more or less—to keep the civil wars at bay.

Particularly popular among the ruling queens in early modern Europe (all in all they were more than 30) was Hera/Juno, married to Zeus/Jupiter and the goddess of childbirth. It may seem strange that Catherine de’ Medici wanted to portray her son Charles, who so feverishly defended the church’s doctrines and a Catholic orthodoxy, as Mars, the Roman god of war. But they were ruling at the height of the Renaissance—which literally means rebirth. And what was supposed to be reborn in all its glory was Greco-Roman antiquity. Prelates and theologians may have formally objected to these tributes to a pagan age. But, regardless of their opinions, they



still got to share the space with Greek and Roman philosophers, poets, scientists, architects, artists—and gods. The great names of antiquity were almost considered to be contemporaries of their colleagues during the Renaissance, Neoplatonists were busy supplying translations and new editions of the central texts of antiquity. And, when the kings returned from war, they wanted to entry through triumphal arches, dressed like a Greek god, or as Alexander the Great—or why not like Caesar himself? When festivities were arranged at the French court, a *fête champêtre* (a kind of rural yet luxurious feast) was often prepared, while the regent's arrival in any city was expected to be a *joyeuse entrée*—a festive entrance. Chroniclers of the time describe how nymphs danced by the hundreds, how tritons blew their horns while trying to hold on to giant (admittedly artificial) whales and turtles, and how “mock battles” recreated the great battles of antiquity, at sea and on land.

Catherine de' Medici understood, just like any other ruler at the time, the importance of the Roman satirist Juvenal's expression “bread and circuses”: It was crucial to divert her people—and the challenging factions around her—as much as possible from the weightier business of politics, and from the deep misery in which the majority lived. She was born during a more peaceful time: the hopeful “golden age” of the early sixteenth century. She was brought up to admire the tolerant, moderate ideas of Erasmus and the concepts of *caritas* and *concordia* of Marguerite de Navarre, the important author and sister of Francis I—Catherine's father-in-law. Her new home country offered a harsher life, when she found herself a widow, the (unofficial) ruler through at least three civil wars, and the mother of three kings. During all these decades of difficult times, it was mainly up to her to balance the Guise family's idea of a “holy war.” But in the meantime, also as a part of her own process of becoming a subject, she tirelessly kept bringing the culture of her Renaissance Italy into France. This also included protecting scientists, writers, and publishers whom the Inquisition wanted to burn at the stake. To her, and according to Neoplatonic philosophy, there was also room for the occult sciences. She was used to a Renaissance world of ideas that included mythology, astrology—and magic. Her astrologers were



important to her, and their role increased with the troubles faced during her reign.

One example is the famous Michel de Nostredame (or Nostradamus), the astrologer and physician working in the midst of several of history's worst plague epidemics. As shown by several researchers, including Mireille Huchon in her recent biography, his work was less about interpreting the stars and setting the queen's horoscope and more about a trusted adviser giving her guidance and support based on the prevailing political situation. When reading all of his works, from his translation of classics, his treatises, and his numerous letters to his prognostication almanacs and his Prophecies, the image of a complex humanist emerges. Born in Provence in 1503, he studied humanities in Avignon and medicine in Montpellier, as did his colleague Rabelais. In concocting his own medicines when fighting the plague during several epidemic outbreaks, and by befriending Lutheran leaders he aroused the suspicion, and then wrath, of the Inquisition. His famous Prophecies, published in 1555 by the brave Macé Bonhomme in Lyon, were indeed intentionally cryptic in the hopes of escaping the wrath of the church.

There are plenty of examples of female regents cooperating closely with astrologers. Queen Christina of Sweden hired several, and in Elizabethan England the mathematician and astrologer John Dee became very important to the queen. Astrology was considered a science, and every princely house paid close attention to the movements of the celestial bodies. The astrologers were often doctors, mathematicians, astronomers, and physicists at the same time. Generally speaking, these scientists, unlike many other men at the absolute center of power, had no desire to marry the female regent they served. Nor were they interested in undermining, or even murdering, her. They were generally content with their position, where they enjoyed the favors of the queen, giving opportunities to make a living and to contribute with their skills. They came to function as reasoning, sincere interlocutors in a role that we might today call "a coach." As mentioned, the astrologers did not only study the firmament but also the complex political game that their benefactors had to deal with.

This also applies to Nostradamus. When he published the Prophecies, Catherine de' Medici summoned him to court and

came to trust him. But the dependence was mutual. Nostradamus was expressly against the wars of religion and was interested in the Lutheran doctrine. In addition, he had Jewish roots. The Inquisition showed a huge interest in him and put him on trial several times. Among other things, he was accused of practicing black magic and sorcery. The queen saved him, making it clear to the church that he was under her protection. Unfortunately, other humanists and scientists did not get away as easily, as already mentioned. For example, the writer and printer Étienne Dolet (1509–1546) had already been tortured and burned at the stake together with his books in 1546. He had faced several accusations. Among other things, he was considered to have spoken too positively about Martin Luther's ideas. The civil wars of course threatened the lives of everyone directly or indirectly, but writers, translators, and publishers who devoted themselves to the "wrong" kind of books were particularly bad off, as in any time of persecution.

Catherine de' Medici traveled for two years (1563–1565) through France with the adolescent king in order to demonstrate the power of the monarchy to the people. She paid Nostradamus a personal visit in his home in 1564. She recognized how Nostradamus expressed infinite confidence, in the midst of the intolerance, even when war was intensifying around them, in an internalized faith, nourished by the Word of God. He appealed, beyond confessional choices, to the sole love of God. His tragic prophetic writings aimed to achieve a conversion, by fear, in the same way that Rabelais used laughter to divert his contemporaries from the temptations of violence that were rising everywhere. Aside from being the queen's astrologer, Nostradamus was a humanist, analyzing the political situation and inspiring the queen in his rejection of violence as a solution. Furthermore, their friendship, meetings, and correspondence were important elements of the empowerment of the queen, and of her transformation from an object to a subject.

The name Nostredame was taken by his family, who were forced to convert from their Jewish faith into Catholicism. Later, Michel changed it into the more Latin-sounding Nostradamus, intended to mean "we give what is ours." Through his writings, he appears not only as a successful physician and astrologer but as a committed citizen, strictly opposed to religious wars and to the

systematic persecutions carried out by fanatic tyrants. His involvement in astrology instead stemmed from a desire to serve others, and to help his powerful clients to navigate the increasingly more difficult situation in Europe at the time. If Nostradamus wanted to be a “prophet” of the mysteries of creation, he seemed much more inspired by an “Erasmian” Christianity, tolerant and believing in the positive forces of mankind. This might seem to contradict the content of his Prophecies, consisting of an accumulation of murders, massacres, crimes, famines, pestilences, parricide, infanticide, deluges, comets, earthquakes... The poetic universe of Nostradamus forms an encyclopedia of human evil: his world of the past, present, and future. But, unlike the prophets of the Bible, Nostradamus clearly did not believe in the punishing God. His uncompromising and highly Neoplatonic message in everything from the prefaces of his published works to his extensive correspondence with clients and friends is that people are responsible for the terrible things that are happening. It is not God who creates the conflicts but we ourselves. And, thus, mankind can also—if we are willing to change—save each other and save the world. The humanism proclaimed by Nostradamus, that Catherine de’ Medici herself took deep interest in—is as far from the uncompromising ultra-orthodoxy of the Inquisition and the Guise faction as one can get. Instead, it embraces a Christian faith that procures openness, tolerance—and mercy. Nostradamus’s understanding of Neoplatonic philosophy and of the concept of *caritas*—is clearly in line with the works of Marguerite de Navarre. They both expressed an infinite confidence, in the midst of the orthodoxy rising around them, in a strong interiorized faith, nourished by the belief in the living word of God. They both appealed, beyond confessional choices, to the love of God alone. Nostradamus used his tragic prophetic universe to achieve an awakening, a conversion, through terror. He is trying this strategy in the same way as Marguerite de Navarre used her witty, subtle humor in *The Heptameron* and as Rabelais used laughter in his farcical satires—to distract their contemporaries from the temptations of violence that were rising everywhere around them.

Even if Catherine de’ Medici did employ Nostradamus as her astrologer and as the royal family’s personal doctor in the first

place, she was also allowing him to comment on the political situation in the 1560s, and even to give her advice, as he did in their correspondence and in their meetings. The letter best known, written from the astrologer to the queen in December 1565, was published and commented on by Michel Chomarat. At least two early copies of this letter are known, one of them preserved in Aix-en-Provence at the Musée Paul-Arbaud. As mentioned above, she even paid Nostradamus a personal visit at his home in Salon, Provence, in 1564.

Two years later, Nostradamus died. Catherine de' Medici continued her struggle to keep the house of Valois on the throne and to avoid yet another civil war. But in 1572 the French wars of religion reached their lowest point, with the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, which began in Paris and then spread to large parts of France. The thousands of victims of the systematic killings were prominent Protestants from all over Europe, who had come to Paris invited by the king and his mother, to attend a royal wedding.

Throughout her correspondence, Catherine de' Medici was constantly stressing the necessity of her actions: that the monarchy had to change the laws in order to prevent the violence from escalating. We have seen how the queen, for decades, was constantly expressing opinions in this direction. Historians are still repeating that Catherine de' Medici herself plotted the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. The idea that she would have ordered this mass murdering, just after having married her Catholic daughter Margaret to the Protestant front figure Henry of Navarre—the future Henry IV—as a symbol of a possible coexistence, is hardly plausible. But that complex problem, regarding that disaster and the question of responsibility, requires its own study. Let us simply conclude instead that the queen fulfilled all her expected duties—first as an object and later as a subject. She provided France with several male heirs—and several daughters who were married off, creating good alliances. Her role as royal mother grew to be decisive for the kingdom. If anything, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre did show once and for all that her unstable and sickly son Charles was not the regent the kingdom needed. Despite the hatred toward her, she once again had to ensure her position as a powerful and reliable regent by all available means.

## Conclusion: Neoplatonic Ideas and the Queen's Concept of Concord

To conclude, let's return to the question of whether Catherine de' Medici did contribute to reshaping the concept of humanism, aligned with the Neoplatonic image of the ruler as the rational soul guiding a conflicted body.

Not only did Catherine de' Medici reshape the image of herself but she also became a pivotal figure with a deep impact on the French monarchy. The queen undoubtedly came from a context strongly influenced by Neoplatonism. In her possession were copies of several of the most important texts from ancient Greece and Rome. She was a part of the Medici family, which was clearly against the Inquisitions and the church's huge project of establishing the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*—the list of thousands of publications deemed as heretical and forbidden to read. The Medici court in Florence had been a major center of Neoplatonic thought, particularly through the work of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. The humanism emphasized the dignity of man, the harmony of opposites, and the potential for the soul's ascent to the divine. At French court, Catherine was confronted with a darker side of the Renaissance, marked by fanatic hate, religious strife, civil disobedience, and a radical calling into question of royal power. Her time in France coincided with an age of disorder and unreason that, in 40 years and eight wars of religion, was to embroil the kingdom in a succession of confrontations, repression, scandals, and massacres, disrupting the country's equilibrium in unprecedented ways. In contrast to all this, Catherine did not only procure a policy of concord. She also commissioned works of art, architecture, and literature that celebrated harmony, order, and classical ideals. Catherine de' Medici sponsored astrologers, philosophers, and mystics, blending in her own way Renaissance occultism with political symbolism—typical of Neoplatonic syncretism. She promoted themes of universal concord and balance, echoing Ficino's ideas of cosmic harmony and ideal leadership. This means that her court entertainments (*tableaux vivants*, festivals, balls, *ballets de cour*) were not just luxurious spectacles but also served as “vehicles” for Neoplatonic allegories. Themes like the reconciliation of Mars and Venus (war and love) or Apollo

and Dionysus reinforced her policy of unity in the fractured political and religious landscape. Although controversial, the queen's interest in astrology and magic—through figures like Michel de Nostredame and Cosimo Ruggieri—was not just superstition. In the Neoplatonic tradition, the occult sciences were seen as tools for understanding divine order. Catherine's court revived elements of Hermetic-Platonic tradition, seeking wisdom through "hidden correspondences" of cosmos. This spiritual world view infused politics with symbolic depth and ritual, reinforcing the sacred role of the monarchy.

Catherine de' Medici was a humanist *and* a refined, diplomatic politician. In her government, she strived for peace and unity, and acted in every way she could to achieve harmony for the kingdom of France. However, when the wars did come, she led her people through them as the sovereign subject she had become, and did what was required without ever losing sight of her own distinct Renaissance humanist vision. That vision involved the revival of classical learning but she emphasized her own individual agency, with a focus on (a Medici) cultural refinement. Catherine reflected these ideals, and she *embodied* them physically: When we examine the portraits discussed in this chapter, it becomes clear how Catherine's attire, especially her elaborate and extravagant gowns and jewelry, symbolized divine authority and spiritual elegance, reflecting Neoplatonic ideals of harmony and beauty. The clothing of Catherine de' Medici, ruler of France, played a part in her visual language, positioning herself as a mediator embodying unity amid the turbulent backdrop of sixteenth-century France.

She did not live to see peace among the conflicting factions. She buried her husband and several of her children, two of whom were kings. Her third son, who became king, died soon after her. Then, her Protestant son-in-law Henry IV ascended the throne. He converted to Catholicism as an act of pragmatism, restored peace in France, introduced religious freedom (a limited one, but still), and restored France's finances. Henry IV inherited and implemented her strategies—aiming *concord* through political marriage, diplomacy, and a moderated religious stance. Catherine de' Medici's wish for an applied Neoplatonic humanism thus, finally, became possible.

## Endnotes

1. “Denis Crouzet a montré que Catherine de Médicis, malgré les mensonges de ses détracteurs, était l’opposé d’une matrone abusive et sanguinaire: convaincue que seul le dialogue offrait une alternative crédible à la guerre, elle a toute sa vie ou presque œuvré en faveur de la paix. De nombreux historiens ont pointé des responsabilités autres que celle de la reine mère : ainsi, Jean-Louis Bourgeon a établi le poids des ingérences internationales et Barbara Diefendorf a prouvé le rôle décisif de la milice parisienne dans les violences.” If not indicated otherwise all translations from French into English are mine.
2. “(d’une torche), une lumière symbolique du Logos qui, intériorisé secrètement par le chrétien, lui permet de se maintenir dans une foi invisible et confiante dans l’amour divin malgré toutes les menaces qui peuvent surgir. Tolérance et dissimulation seraient synonymes dans une tension d’adhésion à l’amour divin. Et ensuite, il a été observé que la royauté française [...] s’approprie le langage et le code de cette *Tolerantia* [...] Ce serait le roi qui dissimulerait en lui le secret d’une politique tentant de rejoindre la volonté divine dans la pratique cachée d’une dissimulation ou une simulation qui serait aussi synonyme d’un amour voulu par Dieu.”
3. As expressed, for example, in the treaty of Saint-Maur in 1560.
4. “Comme Jérémy Foa, on ne peut que souligner la ‘contradiction entre les prétentions universalistes des édits et leur contribution à la domination catholique’ ou, en l’occurrence, la contradiction entre une aspiration – certes naissante – à une cohabitation apaisée entre différentes confessions et des réflexes évaluatifs et donc dénominatifs. De cela, il ressort naturellement que le sens du mot « tolérance » est encore à mettre en relation avec le sens de son étymon, avec ce sème pragmatique qui s’y ajoute dans ce contexte politico-religieux: il s’agit de tolérer, mais pour obtenir un apaisement dont l’État français ne peut pas faire l’économie.”
5. “Chaque faction, dans le temps des guerres de religion, a dû se créer ses propres repères ou marqueurs, sa symbolique spécifique, afin de placer ses violences dans ce qui était pensé comme relevant d’une attente de Dieu. Il y eut ce qu’on peut appeler un ‘travail’ des acteurs des conflits, qui peut être spontané comme programmé, pour projeter de manière scénographique, dans le moment des violences, la nécessité de participation à une guerre qui était voulue par Dieu.”

6. From Léonard Limosin, in Limoges. Those enamel works are now in the Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

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## 5. Civility and Subjectivity: Advice from Philippe Duplessis-Mornay to Henri de Navarre

Dariusz Krawczyk

### Summary

This chapter explores the relationship between civility and the emergence of subjectivity in early modern political thought through the lens of Philippe Duplessis-Mornay's *Advice to the King of Navarre* (1583). Addressed to Henri de Bourbon—future Henri IV of France—this epistle reveals how the prince's public persona was to be shaped through the internalization of courtly and civic norms. Far from being a simple call to moral reform, the text intertwines political strategy, civil education, and the theatricality of royal representation. Duplessis-Mornay emphasizes the need for the prince to conform to an ideal of conduct where manners, gestures, and daily rhythms affirm his legitimacy and authority. This chapter argues that civility, rather than suppressing individuality, becomes a tool of subjectivation: The prince's self-mastery and performative discipline enable him to embody power. Drawing on contemporary treatises on civility, princely education, and the court, the study shows how rules and self-restraint offer not only political stability but also a path to personal fulfillment and social distinction.

### Introduction

In the early modern period, the rise of subjectivity could paradoxically be linked to civility, and we can see this in an epistle that Philippe Duplessis-Mornay wrote to Henri de Navarre.<sup>1</sup> In his eyes, the

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prince's destiny depended on his ability to gain authority by consistently displaying a certain kind of conduct that would affirm his birthright legitimacy. As on a stage of truth, the prince had to reveal himself by his words, his manners, and his actions, whose outward perfection confirms his inner perfection. The individual had to merge with the function: "From the day you put yourself in the service of the state, you lose the freedom to live as you please: you must fulfill and support the role you have assumed" (Erasmus 103).<sup>2</sup>

It is hardly surprising that some princes turn out not to be up to the task, or who refused to submit to obligations and sought refuge in entertainment. In the 1570s and early 1580s, Henri de Bourbon, Duke of Vendôme and King of Navarre (1553–1610), future King of France Henri IV, gave just such an impression. He had a reputation as a fickle man with little interest in politics, a *bon vivant*, and a skirt-chaser, a far cry from the figure of an exemplary prince. And it fell to Philippe Duplessis-Mornay (1549–1623) to spoil the party and remind the king of his duties. In his epistle, he mixed purely political arguments with those relating to civility as a means of subjectivation, personal advancement, and the management of the public persona. It is precisely this question that will be at the heart of this chapter, even if, at first glance, nothing could be further from the emergence of subjectivity than the need to conform to an ideal of civility that demands submission to a whole set of rules and constraints. It is also true that civility, as understood during the Renaissance, highlights one of the fundamental tensions between rules that are imposed and rules that are accepted, between alienation and adherence as a means of self-expression. The court, which crystallized these tensions, was constantly criticized as a place that forces the individual to mask and forget his or her true nature. However, there is a close relationship between, on the one hand, the self-constraint regime, one of whose objectives is to maintain a social image, and, on the other, the possibility of shaping one's social identity so that it corresponds to the highest ideal one can have of oneself.

## Henri de Bourbon's Reputation

Let us begin by briefly outlining the background to the *Advice given to the King of Navarre on the Regulation of His Way of*

*Life* (Advis donné au Roy de Navarre sur le reglement de sa façon de vivre). This short epistle is dated 9 January 1583 and is addressed to King Henri by Philippe Duplessis-Mornay, a diplomat and Protestant theologian already well known at the time. He had served the king since 1576, but he had worked and lived with him briefly, as he had arrived at his château in Nérac only in November 1582 (Daussy 189).<sup>3</sup> As soon as the counselor was able to form his own opinion on his master's way of life (Babelon 252–53), he knew that Henri's bad reputation was well deserved. In this situation, one of Duplessis-Mornay's primary objectives was to change this reputation so that he could appear as a serious and credible king. The speed of his reaction reveals the urgency of the situation because it took him just two months after his installation in Nérac to write his *Advice*. A month later, still disillusioned, he painted this inglorious portrait of his master:

I find solace in this prince, to whom God has called me, and by his voice and by the request of many good people. Not that I see in him all things as they should be; but certainly there is too much more good and too much less evil than in others. And above all, he possesses the incomparable quality of trusting completely in those he believes to be good person. God will complete or compensate for the rest by his grace as he wants to show that he is powerful in infirmity. (Duplessis-Mornay 225)<sup>4</sup>

The sense of urgency can be explained by the national and international context: First, the Protestant party led by Henri de Navarre needed to be consolidated and strengthened. Second, both Henri III, King of France, and his brother François, Duke of Anjou, had no children of their own. Of course, it took a great deal of imagination to already see Henri de Navarre as the heir to the crown of France, but Duplessis-Mornay felt the need to prepare for this eventuality by showing his master not only as the legitimate heir through his blood ties but also as a capable, reasonable, and tolerant ruler. Finally, the king's adviser worked on the project of a broad European Protestant coalition under Henri's command to confront the powerful Philip II of Spain. It is precisely for this reason that he highlights the "great opportunities" (*belles occasions*), that is, the political possibilities opening up before his master at both national and international levels:

The whole of Christendom desires a prince; the king and Monseigneur [king's brother] are childless; the king of Spain is old and declining and will leave either daughters or a young heir ill-suited to govern such a great state made up of so many pieces. The King of Navarre's fine qualities are matched by these fine opportunities, which were undoubtedly born for him if he wants to be born for them. In such a case, his nature calls him to the crown of France and equity to collect the remains of the crown of Spain, which does him so much harm. (189)<sup>5</sup>

The key line is certainly the conditional clause "if he wants to be born for them" (*s'il veut estre né pour elles*), in which Duplessis-Mornay urges his king to work on his public persona to conform to the prince's political, moral, and social ideals. *Belles occasions* had to be seized immediately.

The urgency and necessity of a change in Henri de Navarre's public behavior returned once more a year later when, in a letter dated 14 April 1584, Duplessis-Mornay repeated his appeal to the king to reform his morals. The situation was indeed even more urgent, as François d'Alençon's death was imminent (he died on 10 June 1584), making the Béarnais the heir to the crown.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, we can only imagine the state of mind of the royal adviser who must convince his master to stop running after women and finally start loving France:

These affairs are so open, and you spend so much time on them, that it no longer seems appropriate. It is time, sire, for you to make love to all Christendom, and particularly to France. Let all your movements make you pleasing in her eyes. (578)<sup>7</sup>

The idea Duplessis-Mornay is trying to convey is simple: France is also a woman and she needs to be seduced. He uses the language of amorous conquests, so close to the King of Navarre, to better speak to his imagination and reason, and thus more effectively convince him that from now on he must undertake seduction tactics aimed not at a single woman but at the nation as a whole.

## Give Form to Matter

The biography of the future Henri IV of France tells us that all of Duplessis-Mornay's efforts were ultimately in vain and that the

king would never abandon his habits, but this is not important for our purposes. In essence, the reasoning of the royal adviser is based on the ancient idea of the duties of the prince, which in the sixteenth century underwent evolution due, among other things, to the emergence of new conceptions of social *habitus* and social identity. His text already reflects these new preoccupations, which see self-constraint as a means of shaping one's social identity, and thus allowing the triumph of subjectivity. Civility and politics are therefore combined to enable the prince to triumph over himself, his court, and the kingdom.

Duplessis-Mornay's diagnosis is simple: The king risks losing everything because his virtues do not radiate beyond the circle of those who know him well. "In his person, everyone recognizes the vigor of body, the greatness of courage, and the dexterity of spirit that is almost incomparable. This is the material of which great princes are made, and all that remains is to add form" (189).<sup>8</sup> The diagnosis thus highlights a mismatch between the position occupied and the behavior, aspirations, and image conveyed at a time when, as S. Édouard puts it, "appearances are there to express the inner being" (408).

Therefore, the remedy is to give form to matter. The king must shape himself to find the true expression of his political, moral, and social identity, for the identity of the self-fashioning man can be manipulated: As Greenblatt puts it, it is an "artful process" (2). To seduce France, the king must undergo a relearning of the rules of behavior by living a life regulated by temporal discipline and by devoting himself to royal responsibilities and obligations. So it is a permanent maintenance of a representation corresponding to his quality as King of Navarre, first prince of the blood, and heir to the King of France. Instead of the somewhat unbridled spontaneity and joviality typical of his temperament, he should develop self-control and grace in his manners, gestures, and speech. This was a method of imposing self-creation on others in the process of social elevation. The king had to master the art of pleasing France by integrating himself into a social game. In this context, the subtitle of Nicolas Faret's famous treatise on politeness is evocative, because his *Honnête homme* (1630) was a manual on the "art of pleasing the court."

Several traditions were called upon to promote this conception of the king-courtier: political theories, manuals on the education of the prince (often called mirrors of princes: *speculum principum*), treatises on civility, and reflections on the function and organization of the court. It is difficult to make a clear distinction between them since they are so closely linked, but they are all used to assert royal authority, especially in times of religious turmoil. As Édouard has noted, there was a trend in the sixteenth century toward a greater emphasis on civility in the instructions given to the tutors of royal children:

If you read these instructions carefully, you will see that the strategy is not to turn the prince into an educated sage, but rather into a man who is accomplished in his manners and has internalized dignified, honest behavior. They can rightly be considered treatises on civility. (394)

There are many possible explanations for this emphasis on sociability, and one of them is the growing role of courts in Europe.<sup>9</sup> In sixteenth-century France, the development of courtly life involved the rapid assimilation of foreign, mainly Italian, models,<sup>10</sup> and the new ones were grafted onto the old models of courtly culture.<sup>11</sup> The court molded the courtiers, who in turn had to learn the court's rules, leading to the emergence of civility literature that matched the new ambitions of the nobility, who sought mentors and examples to construct their social identity. For Debailly, "the court is perhaps nothing more than the aura produced by the radiance of power [...] thanks to which, for good or bad reasons, everyone builds their wisdom and rejoices in being as they are" (32).

### Prince's Counselor

It is not surprising, therefore, that the main thrust of Duplessis-Mornay's remarks concerns the life of Henri de Navarre at the court. But, before returning to the text of his *Advice*, it is necessary to consider the very figure of the adviser that appears in this memoir, because it reflects the theory of the relationship between the courtier and his prince. Note that Duplessis-Mornay, a Protestant theologian and polemicist who would later be dubbed "Pope of the Huguenots," does not invoke divine authority or

biblical references to support his arguments and the horizon of his argumentation remains profane. He does not adopt the posture of a preacher but that of an adviser, and this approach reflects the concerns of theorists of courtly life and the ideal of a perfect courtier, whose role, according to Baldassare Castiglione, was to advise the prince, watch over him, and, if necessary, lead him back to the path of virtue. The stakes are very high, because, according to Castiglione, “there is nothing that brings such general good as a good prince, nor anything that can cause such general harm as a bad one” (bk. IV, ch. X).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the adviser must develop strategies to win the prince’s trust and return to his good graces:

[The courtier] can and should easily manage to acquire the goodwill of his prince and so enter into his good graces that he always has free access to him and can speak openly on any subject without irritating him. [...] More than this, he will be able to gradually instill moral virtue in the prince, teaching him continence, fortitude, justice, and temperance and making him savor the sweetness hidden beneath the small coating of bitterness that is the first thing tasted by a man struggling to resist the temptations of vice. Vices are always destructive, offensive, and accompanied by disrepute and reproof, as virtues are beneficial, cheering, and entirely praiseworthy. (bk. IV, ch. IX)<sup>13</sup>

Here we find the crucial role of the courtier, formulated by Michel Foucault in the form of a question: “How can we govern the Prince in such a way that the Prince can govern himself and [govern] others?” (47). The adviser must remind the prince of his rank and duties, and make him love virtue. His position is, of course, a delicate one, and the imbalance of power is such that being a true adviser requires flexibility, tact, and a great deal of precaution. Ottaviano Fregoso is convinced that the ideal courtier is “the sort of man we have described, he will handle this without significant effort and will have the necessary ability and skill to tell the prince the truth about anything” (Castiglione bk. IV, ch. IX).<sup>14</sup> The risk inherent in the courtier’s role is high and recalls another concept of Foucault—*parrêsia* (46–47) and the risk incurred by those who dare tell the truth to their king (56).

As the voice of his prince (Duplessis-Mornay wrote letters in the name of his king) and always close to him, he did not hesitate



to tell him the truth and, using appropriate language, criticized the king's behavior and love affairs. Perhaps it was only his Protestant austerity that prevented him from trying to become the ideal courtier, who should shine in society with grace in gesture, face, speech, dress, and conversation.

## King's Day

As mentioned above, the core idea of the *Advice Given to the King of Navarre on the Regulation of His Way of Life* is that the prince accepts to be entirely devoted to his task and collective values. The moment of conscious self-denial is structuring for subjectivity because both the courtier and the prince accept the burden of their respective positions. This process transforms the courtier into a subject and the king into his master. At court, both the courtier and the prince are constantly in the spotlight, but it is the prince who is always closely watched. His gestures and words are interpreted and related to the ideal of dignity he must embody.<sup>15</sup> In what Édouard calls the "culture of appearances," there is both a spectacular and a paradigmatic dimension: "Through his physical and iconic representation, the young prince allows other gazes that are no longer content to observe only but recognize in him what he is; at once an ideal, idealized being and a social actor in his court" (406–07).

Duplessis-Mornay explains it clearly: "The person of the King of Navarre must be an example to his house; his house a model of just government, and a sign to all Christendom of just and rightful administration" (193).<sup>16</sup> Hence the need to subject public life to a strict temporal discipline that would organize the days of the king and his court, because "the rule of the life of a prince is a sign of the government of the state" (Duplessis-Mornay 190).<sup>17</sup> This much-needed rule, "without which no prince would ever be esteemed" (190),<sup>18</sup> consists of dividing the day into times for work, prayer, and entertainment, because "the day is long when it is well spent, and there is enough time for serious matters, for exercise and pleasure" (190).

He imagines the following timetable: By eight o'clock, the king is already dressed and ready for prayer. Then, for an hour or so, he

attends the first meeting with his advisers to settle current affairs. The rest of the morning before *disner* (lunch) at around 11 o'clock can be devoted to pleasures. The afternoon is also devoted to pleasures until the second council meeting, an hour before *souper* at six or seven in the evening. Finally, the king can do whatever he likes until the evening prayer before bedtime "at nine or ten at the latest" (191).<sup>19</sup>

Although this timetable may not seem very restrictive, and sets aside only two hours for the king to carry out his duties, it must have seemed extremely demanding to King Henri, who was accustomed to going to bed late at night and not getting up before 10 o'clock. So as not to frighten him, Duplessis-Mornay used all the resources of his rhetoric to convince him that such a structured day was precisely what would guarantee the success of royal policy and his promotion as a good king. And, what is more, very little effort would be required. He explains, for example, that the current affairs presented to him will already be "half-digested" by his advisers, and that it will take him only "less than an hour" (*une petite heure*, 191) to settle them. He also insists that the king will have plenty of free time to devote to "such pleasures or exercises as the King sees proper" (191)<sup>20</sup> and that by adhering to such discipline "the king of Navarre will do all things without getting bored, and with ample leisure" (192).<sup>21</sup> Duplessis-Mornay also ends by retelling the merits of such new behavior for the king's public image:

This order would show everyone what order would be to be hoped for if God called him to greater things; it would lead to the assumption that whatever he did by this means would be done with reason. Whereas what he does otherwise is deemed tumultuous and hastily done, even if it were something good. (192)<sup>22</sup>

As a result, such a model would encourage all those around him to follow the king's path to perfection: "The regulations of his house would easily follow those of his person; for each, even in particular, would conform to them" (192).<sup>23</sup> He thus opened up to the king the prospect of domination over himself and others.<sup>24</sup>

Duplessis-Mornay's advice could be just one of many documents recounting Henri de Bourbon's personal life if it did not

contain a very clear political goal, combined with a broader reflection on the role of the court in the construction of the royal persona and on the organization of court life. But what is more, at the same time, Henri III, King of France, was attempting to reform his court based on the same principle of permanent representation of his royal authority and on self-constraint as a means of bringing order to the court and, through the court, to the kingdom.

The idea of imposing a timetable with the precision of a clock is an old one and can be found for example in monastic rules or treatises devoted to education.<sup>25</sup> Henri III undoubtedly inherited it from his mother, who in 1563 wrote the famous letter to her son Charles IX (*Lettre écrite par la royne mère au feu roy Charles peu après sa majorité*) where she urged the young king to “reestablish all things according to their order in reason” (folio 1r),<sup>26</sup> in politics and religion, as well as in the organization of the court and the rhythm of royal days. Using the court of François I and Henri II as an example, she proposed a ceremonial that could be the first form of etiquette at the French court, “a ritual reminding us at all times of the king’s majesty and the position of everyone in society” (Chatenet, “Henri III et ‘l’ordre de la cour’”). Charles IX did not want to comply but it is nonetheless true that Catherine de’ Medici’s main argument was the same as that presented by Duplessis-Mornay; that is, to regain “full authority and obedience” (“autorité et obéissance entière” folio 1v) the court must reflect the charismatic power and values of the king:

I think that by seeing you regulated in your person and ways of living and your court restored with the honor and order that I once saw in it, this will be an example throughout your kingdom and an acknowledgment of every one of the desires you have to restore all things according to God and reason. (folio 1v)<sup>27</sup>

Since appearances are a means of governing, to be up to the task the king must spare no effort and form a social habitus. A similar logic underlies the first two general regulations of the French court signed by Henri III, in 1578 and 1585. Both were inspired by the desire “to restore this kingdom to its former form, dignity, and splendor for the peace and relief of its subjects” (*Règlements généraux* folio 10r).<sup>28</sup> They also reflect the wish to subject courtly

life to temporal discipline (the second regulation is entitled *Ordre pour le département des heures*) and to put the king back at its center as the one who sets the whole courtly machine in motion around himself.

Thus, Philippe Duplessis-Mornay's project, submitted to his master Henri de Navarre, is deeply rooted in the very current thinking of his time on the links between civility and power. He is convinced that the acceptance of the constraint and the effort to realize a self-ideal are not only not alienating but in fact transform an obligation into a new freedom. As Stephano Guazzo puts it, "we must constrain our will and sometimes make it content with what it dislikes, turning necessity into a virtue" (19).<sup>29</sup> The court and, more generally, the constraints of civility can therefore constitute a space for the expansion of individuality, in which the individual realizes the highest ideal of himself. Duplessis-Mornay encourages therefore his master to achieve subjectivation through the internalization of rules.

Civility can offer the conditions for the emergence of an emancipated self, in full possession of its faculties. This is also evident in the paratexts of treatises on civility in French translations (which have the additional advantage of outlining the ideological and social horizon of their reception in France). The dedicatory epistle that precedes the first French translation of Giovanni Della Casa's famous Italian treatise *Galateo, overo de' costumi* was addressed to Henri de Navarre, who was just nine years old at the time. The choice of such a young recipient can be explained by the printer's target audience, namely the tutors and parents of young nobles. This was also the case for Erasmus's *On Civility in Children* (1530), dedicated to a young Henry of Burgundy (his *The Education of a Christian Prince*, published in 1516, was dedicated to the young Charles, the future emperor Charles V). For Della Casa's translator, Jean du Peyrat, learning civility is the crucial stage in structuring a young man's identity. As a result, the principles of ancient education, such as military excellence, clearly seem secondary:

All the virtue and perfection of the gentleman does not consist in pricking a horse well, handling a lance, standing well in his armor,

using all weapons, governing himself modestly between ladies, or training himself in love: for these are but a few of the exercises attributed to the gentleman. And there is more: how he should behave at the table of Kings and Princes, how to arrange his language respecting people according to their degrees and qualities, looks, gestures, and even the slightest sign and wink he might make. (Della Casa folio 6v–7r)<sup>30</sup>

This passage reveals evolution in behavior and the importance attached to civility. It highlights the fact that it now takes more than before to be a well-educated gentleman, and makes civility the foundation for the construction of a prince's social identity. As if the greatest danger were no longer dishonor but a *faux pas*: "a small fault causes a great virtue and excellent merit to lose strength and praise" (Della Casa folio 6v).<sup>31</sup> In the list of little Henri's qualities, his civility ranks high: He is "the paragon and mirror of others in courtesy, civility, good manners, and praiseworthy customs" (folio 6r).<sup>32</sup> In this culture of appearances, he already achieves perfect harmony between inside and outside: "I see that the virtue shining on your face will encourage nobility to follow your footsteps in your behavior, manners, conditions, and ways of doing things" (folio 6r).<sup>33</sup> The little prince already triumphs over others thanks to his mastery of civility.

It is difficult, in this case, to share Anthony Low's point of view that the early modern affirmation of subjectivity could only be achieved through a simple rejection of constraints. According to him, before the early modern period, "The experience of the inner depths of the self was originally more or less congruent with tradition and with the individual's sense of himself as a member of society and a participant in his family and community." Then, gradually, this attitude changed to "a different kind of self-definition, more private, more revolutionary, more anxious to escape from customs and debts owed to one's ancestors, which were now regarded as oppressive and self-destructive" (184). If such a rejection could be observed in Henri de Navarre's disinterest in politics and the public cause, which would be constitutive of his identity, we find the complete opposite in the case of Duplessis-Mornay's epistle or the royal *reglements*. The subjectivity of the prince is like no other, and to triumph in the political and social

space it must materialize through behavior its conformity to the ideal.

The discourse of civility contributed to the emergence of subjectivity, despite its predilection for the collective over the individual. By emphasizing man's perfectibility, it imposed the idea of self-creation and encouraged people to correct, amend, and perfect themselves: in other words, to acquire a good habitus. The courtier is always pondering his image and, as a result, is forced into a constant activity of self-creation. He never ceases to rise because of the constraint and this vertical dynamic lies at the very heart of the project of civility as it developed in the sixteenth century and beyond. It should be noted that treatises devoted to civility also aim to glorify and preserve the individual's ego and self-esteem against all dangers. They provide a sense of control over one's social destiny because they promise to help avoid pitfalls, climb the social ladder, and keep the acquired position—a promise we can always find in etiquette manuals.

## Endnotes

1. The author received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research program (Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions research and innovation program) under grant agreement CIVILITY no. 1011108056.
2. "Postea quam te semel reipublicæ dedicasti, jam non est tibi liberum tuo more vivere; personam quam suscepisti, sustineas ac tuearis oportet" (Erasmus 103). All translations into English are mine if not indicated otherwise.
3. For information on the life of Philippe Duplessis-Mornay and his relationship with the King of Navarre, it is worth consulting Hugues Daussey's book, Didier Poton's biography of Duplessis-Mornay and Jean-Pierre Babelon's biography of the king. These sources have been used here to outline the historical context.
4. "Je me console aulcunement en ce prince, pres duquel Dieu m'a appellé, et par sa voix et par la sollicitation de plusieurs gens de bien. Non que j'y voye toutes choses à souhait; mais certes, et trop plus de bien et trop moins de mal qu'es aultres; et sur tout ung bien incomparable de se confier totalement en ceulx qu'il pense gens de

bien. Dieu achevera ou supplera le reste par sa grace; et peut estre par lui, comme par plusieurs vaisseaux infirmes, veult il monstrier qu'il est puissant en infirmité" (Duplessis-Mornay 225).

5. "Toute la chrestienté soupire apres ung prince; le roy et monseigneur sans enfans; le roy d'Espagne aagé et caduc, qui lairra ou des filles, ou ung jeune heritier, mal propre à contenir ung si grand estat, composé de tant de pieces rapportees. Ces belles occasions se rencontrent avec les belles parties du roy de Navarre, et sans doubte sont nees pour lui, s'il veult estre né pour elles. Et d'autant plus que la nature l'appelle en tel cas à la couronne de France, et l'equité à recueillir les dissipations de celle d'Espagne, qui lui tient tant de tort" (Duplessis-Mornay 189).

6. To give more importance to his appeal, this letter drafted by Duplessis-Mornay was signed by two other collaborators of Henri de Navarre: de Chassin-court and de Clervant (Duplessis-Mornay 574). See also Daussey 269–70.

7. "Ces amours si decouverts, et aulxquels vous donnés tant de temps, ne semblent plus de saison. Il est temps, sire, que vous fassiés l'amour, et à toute la chrestienté, et particulièrement à la France. Que par tous vos mouvements vous vous rendiés agreable à ses yeux" (Duplessis-Mornay 578).

8. "En sa personne, chacung recognoist une vigueur de corps, une grandeur de courage, une dexterité d'esprit presque incomparable. C'est la matiere dont se font les grands princes, et ne reste que d'y adjouster la forme" (Duplessis-Mornay 189).

9. On the history of the French court, see Solnon; for information specific to sixteenth-century France, see Knecht.

10. The popularity of civility literature can be gauged by the speed with which Italian treatises on civility were translated into French: It took nine years to translate Castiglione's *Cortegiano* (1528–1537) but only four years for Giovanni Della Casa's *Galateo overo de' costumi* (1558–1562) and five years for the translation of Stefano Guazzo's *La Civil conversazione* (in Italian in 1574, in French in 1579). *Bibliographie des traités de savoir-vivre en Europe. Volume 1. France—Angleterre—Allemagne* gives an idea of the scale of the phenomenon (for the sixteenth century, see pages 31–42).

11. It should be noted that, at the same time, a powerful anti-courtois current was developing, as described by Pauline M. Smith. According

to Debailly, there is a relationship between this anticourtly discourse and the emergence of subjectivity in literature, and anticourtier satire can be considered “a major agent in the emancipation of the subject in the 16th and 17th centuries” (20). By denouncing the detestable figure of the courtier, the authors of satire highlight the structuring experiences associated with the emergence of subjectivity: rejection, alienation, and voluntary exile. A poet “willingly represents himself as an anti-hero, an outcast, a misfit” (29), and embodies values contrary to those of the court: “To the distorted model of court life, the satirist opposes the heroism of truth and sincerity” (31). This subjectivity implies divorce and secession, and the poems they write materialize this gesture of rupture.

12. “perché non è bene alcuno che così universalmente giovi come il bon principe, né male che così universalmente nocchia come il mal principe” (Castiglione bk. IV, ch. X 375). Castiglione’s *Cortegiano* contains passages that are highly critical of the princes of the time: “princes today are so corrupted by evil habits, ignorance, and false ideas of themselves; it is so difficult to acquaint them with the truth and convince them to behave virtuously” (“Dico adunque che, poiché oggidi i principi son tanto corrotti dalle male consuetudini e dalla ignoranza e falsa persuasione di se stessi, e che tanto è difficile il dar loro notizia della verità ed indurgli alla virtù” Castiglione bk. IV, ch. IX 373).

13. “il cortegiano [...] po facilmente e deve procurar d’acquistarsi la benivolenzia ed adescar tanto l’animo del suo principe, che si faccia adito libero e sicuro di parlargli d’ogni cosa senza esser molesto; [...] oltra di questo, a poco a poco infundergli nell’animo la bontà ed insegnargli la continenzia, la fortezza, la giustizia, la temperanzia, facendogli gustar quanta dolcezza sia coperta da quella poca amaritudine, che al primo aspetto s’offerisce a chi contrasta ai vicii; li quali sempre sono dannosi, dispiacevoli ed accompagnati dalla infamia e biasimo, così come le virtù sono utili, giocunde e piene di laude” (Castiglione bk. IV, ch. IX 373–74).

14. “e se egli sara tale come s’è detto, con poca fatica gli verra fatto, e cosi potra aprirgli sempre la verita di tutte le cose con destrezza” (Castiglione 374).

15. The prince’s education was already based on this principle: “the governors were careful to curb his [the prince’s] appetites and temperament by appealing to reason, pointing out to him how his



dignity required an irreproachable habitus at all times since he was the object of all eyes" (Édouard 394).

16. "La personne donc du roy de Navarre doit estre ung exemple à sa maison ; sa maison, ung modele d'ung juste gouvernement, et une arre à toute la chrestiensté, d'une juste et legitime administration" (Duplessis-Mornay 193).

17. "la regle de la vie d'ung prince porte ung grand prejuté pour la regle de l'estat" (Duplessis-Mornay 190).

18. "sans laquelle nul prince ne feut oncq estimé" (Duplessis-Mornay 190).

19. "journee est longue quand elle bien departie, y en a assés pour les choses serieuses et pour les exercices et plaisirs" (Duplessis-Mornay 190).

20. "tel plaisir ou exercice que le roy trouveroit bon" (Duplessis-Mornay 191).

21. "le roy de Navarre feroit toutes choses sans s'ennuyer, et avec ample loisir" (Duplessis-Mornay 192).

22. "Cest ordre monstreroit à ung chacung quel ordre seroit à esperer, quand Dieu l'appelleroit à choses plus grandes ; feroit presumer que tout ce qu'il feroit par ceste voie, seroit fait avec raison, au lieu que ce qu'il fait aultrement est estimé tumultuaire et à la haste, ores mesmes qu'il soit bon" (Duplessis-Mornay 192).

23. "Le reglement de sa maison suivroit aisement celuy de sa personne ; car chacung, mesme en particulier, s'y voudroit conformer" (Duplessis-Mornay 192).

24. Duplessis-Mornay also encourages the king to expel from his house all those who could harm his reputation: "if he wishes to make it known, both to his own people and to foreigners, that vice is displeasing to him, and that it does not reign in his soul, he must allow it to dwell as little as possible in his house, removing defamed persons from his midst, and keeping those who are virtuous and of good repute" ("s'il veult faire cognoistre, et aux siens et aux estrangers, que le vice luy deplaist, et qu'il ne regne point en son ame, il faut qu'il le laisse habiter le moins qu'il pourra en sa maison, esloignant les personnes diffamees d'aupres de la sienne, et en approchant les vertueuses et de bon renom" 192).

25. A good example is the description of Gargantua's days in François Rabelais's *Gargantua* (1534): ch. XXI "L'estude de

Gargantua, selon la discipline de ses precepteurs Sophistes,” ch. XXIII “Comment Gargantua feut institué par Ponocrates en telle discipline, qu’il ne perdoit heure du jour,” and ch. XXVIII “Comment Gargantua employoit le temps quand l’air estoit pluvieux.”

26. “retablir toutes choses selon leur ordre à la raison” (*Lettre* folio 1r).

27. “Je cuide que vous voyant réglé en vostre personne et façons de vivre et vostre cour remise avec l’honneur et police que j’y ay veu autrefois que cela sera un exemple par tout vostre royaume et une congnoissance à un chacun du désir et volonté que vous avez de remettre toutes choses selon Dieu et raison” (folio 1v).

28. “remettre ce royaume en son ancienne forme, dignité et splendeur pour le repos et soulagement de ses subiects” (*Règlements généraux* folio 10r).

29. “E perci debbiamo costringere la volontà nostra e farla alcuna volta contentar di quel che le dispiace, onde ne segua di necessità virtù” (Guazzo [1 A12b] 19).

30. “Toute la vertu & perfection du Gentilhomme Monseigneur ne consiste pas à piquer bien un cheval, à manier une lance, à se tenir propre en son harnois, à s’aider de toutes armes, à se gouverner modestement entre les dames, ou à dresser l’Amour : car c’est un des exercices encore que l’on attribue au gentilhomme, il y a plus, le service de table devant les Roys & Princes, la façon d’ageancer son langage respectant les personnes selon leurs degrez, & qualitez les œillades, les gestes & jusques au moindre signe & clin d’œil qu’il sçauroit faire” (Della Casa folio 6v–7r).

31. “une petite faute est cause qu’une bien grande vertu, & excellent merite perd la force & louange” (Della Casa folio 6v).

32. “paragon & miroir des autres en courtoisie, civilité, bonnes mœurs & loüables coustumes” (Della Casa folio 6r).

33. “je voy que la vertu qui luit en vostre visage esguillonera la noblesse & à suivre la trace de voz façons, mœurs, conditions & manieres de faire” (Della Casa folio 6r).

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## 6. Another Orientalism: Desiderius Erasmus and Jean Bodin

Anne Fastrup

### Summary

This chapter explores the nuanced and complex ways Renaissance humanists engaged with the idea of the Turk, moving beyond the common view of their work as solely hostile toward Islam. It examines the works of Desiderius Erasmus and Jean Bodin, highlighting how these figures used the Turk as a rhetorical tool in discussions about war, morality, and sovereignty rather than just as the “other” to be feared or despised. Erasmus, while using Turcophobic rhetoric, saw Turks as potential Christians, advocating for conversion over war. His approach reflects a tension between the dehumanizing stereotypes of the time and a recognition of shared humanity. On the other hand, Bodin admired the Ottoman Empire’s stability and the sultan’s absolute sovereignty, using this as a model for his own ideas on political authority. His portrayal of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent’s execution of his son as an example of necessary brutality for maintaining sovereignty reveals a more complex aspect of early modern European orientalism. The chapter argues that Renaissance humanism’s engagement with the Turk was not monolithic but a multifaceted discourse that used the figure of the Turk to address significant political and moral questions of the time. This “other orientalism” suggests a more intricate legacy of Renaissance thought, one that acknowledges its complexities and contradictions.

### Introduction

This chapter builds upon the critical foundation laid by Renaissance scholars who have thoroughly exposed the Turcophobia, crusading

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ideology, and hostility toward Islam embedded in humanist discourse. While their work has unmasked the racial and ethnic prejudices prevalent in Renaissance humanism, I seek to move beyond these important revelations. Rather than reiterating their findings, this chapter shifts the focus from the content of humanist commentary on the Turks to the broader political or cultural discussions in which this discourse was embedded. This approach represents a methodological departure from the critical-genealogical tradition rooted in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), moving instead toward a contextualized analysis that examines how texts, ideas, and representations responded to local circumstances, questions, and debates. My goal is not merely to expose the stereotypes within humanist discourse on the Turks but to investigate how humanists employed the figure of the Turk in discussions on various topics, including war, justice, morality, sovereignty, and patriarchy. I contend that there exists "another orientalism" within humanism—one that utilizes the Turks and the perceived threat they posed as a rhetorical tool, pretext, or occasion for engaging in local discourses.

I examine four texts, engaging deeply with some and more broadly with others. These include *War against the Turks* (1530) by Desiderius Erasmus and *Method for Easy Comprehension of History* (1566) and *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1576) by the French humanist and political thinker Jean Bodin. I also comment on Jean Racine's tragedy *Bajazet*, which was performed in 1672, a century after Bodin's *Six Books of the Commonwealth*. These authors are selected and grouped together because they represent two main perspectives in the humanist view of the Turks: the Christian view (Erasmus) and the secular view (Bodin and Racine). Additionally, each author offers a perspective that differs from the more common perceptions of the Turks. Erasmus, through his Christian philosophy and the concept of *pietas*, views the Turks as potential Christians. Bodin challenges the common view of the Ottoman Empire as a tyranny, even defending the Ottoman law of fratricide. In their different ways, Erasmus and Bodin represent an orientalism that is less focused on who the Turks "are" and more on what their conquests reveal about the moral and political state of the Christian world.

## Defining the Turks in Renaissance Humanism

“Humanist reactions to Ottoman Turks are the legacy of the Renaissance no less important than the dignity of man, republican thought, and three-point perspective in painting,” Nancy Bisaha states (11), thus correcting the predominately positive view of humanism as integral to “Renaissance civilization,” a concept portrayed by Jakob Burckhardt, the pioneer of modern Renaissance studies. While focalizing exclusively on Italy, Burckhardt depicted the Renaissance as an age of progress, innovation, and discovery, a “civilization” that gave birth to the modern state and the modern individual. This interpretation, which remained influential among historians well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, characterized Renaissance humanist thought as skeptical, individualistic, and secular. However, concurrent with the emergence of posthumanist critiques of humanism (often mischaracterized as Cartesianism), Renaissance scholars challenged this celebrated image by highlighting the role of the humanists in fostering and spreading hostile and derogatory views about Turks and Islam during the early modern period. Hankins notes that fifteenth-century humanists, including prominent figures like Aneas Sylvius Piccolomini, Johan Bessarion, and Giannantonio Campano, wrote far more about the Ottomans than about the more traditional humanist themes of human dignity, free will, education, human perfectibility, and the immortality of the soul (Hankins 112). Their interest was not merely an intellectual response to the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Many of the over 400 manuscripts on the Turks, authored by humanists between 1453 and 1492, were vigorous calls for crusade (Hankins 113). The absence of an anti-Ottoman crusade was not due to a lack of effort on the part of the humanists.

Of course, the humanists also approached the Turks through analogies to the classical literature. According to Lausten and Madsen, Petrarch, often regarded as the “father of humanism,” exemplifies this humanist approach to the Turkish complex. In his works, including the poems from *Canzoniere* and *Triumph*, as well as the epic poem *Africa*, which is modeled on Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Petrarch uses examples from Greek and Roman antiquity



to illustrate how the Christian world should approach the Islamic Orient (Lausten 70–76; Madsen 87–101). The cultural prejudices in ancient texts were also used to define Turks ethnically, morally, and politically. Thus, humanists described the Turks as originating from the Scythians of Pontus, the savage nomadic people to whom Herodotus referred in the fourth book of his *Histories*, “with all the implied connotations of a threat to culture and civilization” (Ohanna 102). The opposition between the courageous, egalitarian Greeks and the cowardly, luxurious, and servile Persians in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides helped the humanists develop a “unified discourse of European civility versus Asian barbarism,” which according to Bisaha continues to be crucial to European culture and self-understanding (Bisaha 44, 185). As for the political nature of the Turks, Aristotle was the primary authority. His depiction of the Asiatic peoples, the Persians, as naturally servile and therefore more tolerant than the Greeks or the Europeans to despotic rule, was widely accepted and applied to the Turks, reinforcing the belief in their predisposition to tyranny (Curtis 53). Nevertheless, two prominent political thinkers within the sixteenth-century humanist discourse on the Turks—Machiavelli and Jean Bodin—deviated from the prevailing view by refusing to characterize the Ottoman Empire as a tyranny.

We will revisit Bodin later in this discussion. For now, however, I wish to address another question that preoccupied humanists, including the so-called biblical humanists: how the advance of the Turks could or should be understood within a Christian theological framework. During a period inundated with apocalyptic texts, the dramatic expansion of the Ottoman Empire was frequently interpreted as definitive evidence of impending millennial trials or redemption. This perspective was, to some extent, shared by Erasmus, who, like others such as Martin Luther, viewed the Ottoman victories as a manifestation of God’s wrath or divine punishment.

### Erasmus—The Turk as a Half-Christian

When the air was thick with gloomy predictions and anxious uncertainty after Suleiman the Magnificent’s siege of Vienna in 1529, Erasmus published a tract on the Turkish question in March 1530,

at the behest of anxious councilors in Cologne: *A Most Useful Discussion of Proposals for War against the Turks, Including an Exposition of Psalm 28* (*Consultatio de bello Turcis inferendo, et obiter enarratus psalmi XXVIII*), known for short as *De Bello Turcico*. While distancing himself from the great crusading projects of the Italian humanists, Erasmus reflected on the Ottoman expansion: Should Christians go to war against the Turks or repent of their sins? Martin Luther had raised similar questions in *On War Against the Turk*, which was published in 1529, shortly after the Ottoman siege. Erasmus largely shares the German reformer's theological interpretation of the Turkish threat and his consequent opposition to war. Thus, *De Bello Turcico* ends in much the same place as Luther in *On War Against the Turk*, that a defensive war against the Turks is possible under the following four conditions: Christians must repent, the church must not be involved, the war must be waged by Charles V, Francis I and King Ferdinand, and it must be financed by cuts in the princes' spending rather than by additional taxes.

However, this summary gives a partially misleading picture of *War Against the Turks*. Erasmus spins his answers into a long, complex argument that complicates the picture of what he is answering—a fact he himself comments on at the end of the text: "Someone will press me here and say: 'Why such a long speech? Tell us plainly, do you think we should go to war or not?'" (Erasmus 264).<sup>1</sup> However, Erasmus did not see it as his task to simply recommend or warn against war; if the Christian world went to war against the Turks, defeat was not an option, and Erasmus therefore saw it as his task to prepare the monarchs for the right decision by thoroughly illuminating the many facets of the matter. In the next sentence, however, he makes a new recommendation: The surest way to defeat the Turks, he explains, is to emulate the method used by the apostles when they won the whole (sic) earth for their emperor. The method was to behave in a morally exemplary way so that all nations would want to be like the apostles. This means that Christians not only should but could convert the Turks if, instead of slaughtering them, they practiced and preached the mercy, kindness and reconciliation with which Jesus met everyone as he walked the earth. In other words, Erasmus attributes an almost magical power of persuasion

to exemplarity—and preaching. As he points out elsewhere, for example in *The Complaint of Peace* (1517), God gave man the gift of speech to create peace. I return below to the centrality of peace in Erasmus's thought.

*De Bello Turcico* is a long digression from how, despite claims to the contrary, it ultimately answers the Turk question, namely that the Turks must be “fought” through conversion, not war. In this light, it becomes more understandable why Erasmus discreetly distances himself from the Turcophobic rhetoric he has adopted from his Italian humanist colleagues. One believes in conversion only if one believes that the unbeliever has the potential to become a true Christian. And according to Erasmus (and many others), the Muslim is a half-Christian. But, before he develops this understanding of the Turks, he turns his attention to the Christians. What does the rise of the Turks signify? What do their victories say about the strengths and weaknesses of Christian princes? What does it say about the faith of Christians that unbelievers are victorious in the world?

### The Scourge of God

“They [the Turks] rule because God is angered [...] They owe their victories to our sins” (Erasmus 231),<sup>2</sup> writes Erasmus, following Luther very closely. The Turks are just another evil in the cascade of misfortunes that God has rained down on Christians to punish them for their sinful behavior and to admonish them to repentance and atonement. But, as bad Christians, they show no signs of repentance or atonement. Disease, hunger, and suffering from the divine catalog of punishments have become their normal state: “We have become so accustomed to wars, banditry, riots, factionalism, plunder, pestilence, famine and want that they are no longer considered misfortunes” (Erasmus 211).<sup>3</sup> In addition to the evils that God visited upon humanity, there are the injustices that Christians inflict on each other: The nobility plunder the villages, the peasants overcharge for their produce, the craftsmen overcharge for their services; everyone cheats everyone else, all classes and strata devour each other. At the same time, churches are destroyed, images defaced, and priests expelled—the Lutheran Reformation is part

of the gloomy contemporary diagnosis: “Calamities of this kind, which constantly beset us, are nothing but messages from the Lord calling us back to him” (Erasmus 215).<sup>4</sup> The religious and political institutions of society are no better. The church is corrupted by bad shepherds: “How terribly the shepherds of the Church have fallen below their archetype” (Erasmus 241).<sup>5</sup> Monarchy is threatened by tyrants masquerading as kings. Falsehood, greed, tyranny, and moral obtuseness have spread like a disease in the social, religious, and political order.

Having set the scene in terms of this pervasive moral crisis, Erasmus turns to what is supposed to be the main theme of the book: the question of whether it is justifiable to go to war against the Turks. Erasmus admits that the many atrocities and defeats inflicted on the Christian world by the Turks justify taking up arms. But should Christians take up arms at all? Should they not seek martyrdom instead, as the Christians did when persecuted by the Roman emperors? Isn’t resisting the Turks the same as trying to escape God’s punishment? Erasmus shares Luther’s interpretation of the Turks as God’s punishment but at the same time believes that Christians have the right to defend themselves against the Turks as long as the church does not interfere and the war is waged by secular power (Luther had come to the same conclusion in 1529, which Erasmus seems not to have taken note of). But there is also an empirical argument against war in the form of the countless—unsuccessful—attempts by Christian kings to destroy the Turks. These experiences are now confronted with Erasmus’s assessment of the Christian war effort: “we have not done Christ’s work but fought the Turks in a Turkish frame of mind” (Erasmus 220).<sup>6</sup> What exactly it means to fight the Turks in a “Turkish frame of mind” is answered by Erasmus later in the book. Before then, he points out a scandalous paradox: The Turks, who have “only” Muhammad, have managed to extend their tyrannical rule both east and south, while the Christians, who have Christ, remain defeated and face the prospect of losing even more land to the Turks. Did the Turks prevail because of their piety? No, they did not. Exceptional courage? Not even because, as Erasmus says, echoing the Italian humanists, the Turks are “a race debilitated by debauchery and fearsome only as brigands” (Erasmus 231).<sup>7</sup> The victories of the

Turks are due solely to “our sins.” They have provoked the wrath of God, which is why it is ultimately this wrath—and not the Turks—that the Christians have fought against and lost. But what sins were the Christians guilty of when they fought the Turks? This one:

[W]e assail the Turks with the self-same eagerness with which they [the Turks] invade the lands of others. We are inspired by the craving for power, we covet riches; to put it bluntly, we are fighting the Turks like Turks. Moreover, the chronicle of these events shows clearly enough that it was always our quarrels, our ambition, our inherent faithlessness that brought about the worst of these disasters. The unrelenting feud between Palaeologus and Cantacuzenus opened the door to the Turks in Europe. (Erasmus 232)<sup>8</sup>

Note how Erasmus establishes a semantic congruence between *sin* and *Turk*, between *sinfulness* and *Turkishness*. To wage war in the Turkish spirit and to fight the Turks as Turks is to be driven by the sinful lust for power, territory and wealth that Turks are usually accused of being driven by. In other words, you see the mote in the other’s eye, but you do not see the beam in your own.

As a saying, “we fight the Turks in a Turkish frame of mind” (and “we are fighting the Turks like Turks”) belongs to a group of closely related and widely used topoi such as “being like a Turk,” “being worse than the Turks,” and “turning Turk.” In a world of religious, political and social conflict, accusing other Christians of being “like the Turk [Sultan]” or “worse than the Turks” is an obvious rhetorical strategy to legitimize and delegitimize a cause, an opponent, an action, or an institution, as the saying endows the cause or opponent with a symbolic, religious meaning (Housley 141). However, the figure of speech also shows that the external infidel enemy has a double in the form of an infidel enemy within Christianity (Housley 138). According to this cultural imaginary, Christian identity thus contains a threatening, evil, and dark entity—à la the devil—that has the strength and will to undermine the reign of God in man and in society in general. “The Turkish essence, for Erasmus, is human immorality at its worst,” writes Nathan Ron, who rightly describes the great humanist as “Turcophobic,” but, he adds, according to Erasmus, the Turkish essence must be fought in the “Christian domestic arena. It is present in the hearts of Christians and must be uprooted” (Ron 34).

If, on the one hand, Turcophobia points back to an antagonistic understanding, then the notion of a special Turkish essence, a “Turkishness,” can be said to destabilize the semantic boundary between what is meant by a Turk and a Christian. But what about the ontological boundary? Does Erasmus also believe that Turks of flesh and blood are somehow like Christians and vice versa?

## A Common Humanity

Even those scholars who emphasize Erasmus’s contempt for Islam and hostility toward the Turks admit that, as one of the few humanists, he does recognize Turks as human beings (Idris; Ron). But this recognition is accompanied by a strange, convoluted and complex argument. It starts by labeling the Turks as “these specimens of *humanity*,” followed by this relative clause: “whose inhumanity [immanitate] has for long centuries inflicted and worn-down Christendom” (Erasmus 221, my emphasis).<sup>9</sup> The Latin adjective *immanis* connotes monstrosity, cruelty, and barbarism and is the lexical counterpart of *humanitas*, which as a concept expresses the cultural ideal of the Renaissance. *Immanis* and *immanitate* are also the favorite terms of the humanists to describe the Turks (Idris 161; Ron 34). Thus, the Turk is considered both a fellow human being and an inhuman being—a cruel barbarian, the negation of everything a human being should be according to the humanists.

When Erasmus later dissociated himself from the then widespread hatred of Turks, he added another feature to Turkish identity:

[W]hen the ignorant mob hear the name of the Turks, they immediately fly into a rage and clamour for blood, calling them dogs and enemies of the Christian name; it does not occur to them that, first of all, they are human beings and, what is more, half-Christian. (Erasmus 232–33)<sup>10</sup>

Five pages later, referring to most Christians, Erasmus writes:

But the mass of Christians wrongly believes that anyone is allowed to kill a Turk, as one would a mad dog, for no better reason than he is the Turk [...] any who believe that they will fly straight up to heaven if they happen to fall in battle against the Turks are sadly deluding themselves. (Erasmus 238)<sup>11</sup>

If the Turk is not (after all) a mad dog but a human being and a half-Christian, what should Christians do in the face of the Turkish threat?

If we really want to heave the Turks from our necks, we must first expel from our hearts *a more loathsome race of Turks*, avarice, ambition, the craving for power, self-satisfaction, impiety, extravagance, the love of pleasure, deceitfulness, anger, hatred, envy; having slaughtered these with the sword of the spirit, let us rediscover a truly Christian spirit and then, *if required*, march against the flesh-and-blood Turks under the banners of Christ and, with him as our champion, defeat them. (Erasmus 242, my emphasis)<sup>12</sup>

The elimination of the threat posed by the flesh-and-blood outer Turk must be achieved by expelling the even more vile inner Turk that has taken up residence in the hearts of Christians where God should be enthroned. It is worth noting that the little “if required” opens up the possibility that casting out the inner Turk will make a war against the flesh-and-blood Turk superfluous. One could almost be led to believe that the flesh-and-blood Turk poses no threat at all, and that it is not only the semantic difference between Turk and Christian that seems fluid and porous. With the flesh-and-blood Turk on the scene, the ontological difference between Turks and Christians also becomes fluid. Both are human, both have something inhuman in them, and, while the Turk is half-Christian, the Christian is a sinner and therefore a bad Christian. The status of the Turks as potential Christians is thus mirrored in the status of the Christians as bad Christians who should repent, atone, and improve to become true and good Christians. In this way, Erasmus gives us a glimpse of the Turk and the Christian without the antagonistic identification that usually defines them as opposites: the civilized versus the barbarian, the good versus the evil. Amid the twists and turns of the argument, the Turk and the Christian suddenly appear as two equally complex, fallible, and perfectible identities, characterized by qualities that both overlap and reflect those of the other. They even face an identical process of inner reformation: The Christian must find his way back to a godly way of life through repentance, while the Turk must find his way back to a godly way of life through conversion. When this happens, peace will descend, and no one will need to fear the Turks.

## Peace

*War Against the Turks* both recycles and deconstructs the antagonistic stereotypes of the time. The deconstructive impulse, however, does not stem from a critical attitude toward cultural stereotyping and a related desire to promote the recognition of foreign cultures. Instead, *War Against the Turks* should be seen in the context of Erasmus's other writings on war and peace: *War Is Sweet to Those Who Have Not Tried It* (1515), *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), written for the young Charles V, and *Complaint of Peace* (1517). In all four writings, war is described as "unnatural, irrational, engineered by criminal governments, always unjustifiable" (Housley 13). The condemnation of war has led some to label Erasmus a proto pacifist (Tracy; Pabel), which others have denied, pointing out that he sees war as both inevitable and necessary (O'Donovan and Lockwood O'Donovan; Fernández-Santamaría). Both are right in a sense. Erasmus condemns the wars that Christian princes are waging against each other: "We fight endlessly among ourselves over some useless plot of ground in what are worse than civil wars, and meanwhile the Turks have extended their rule, or rather their reign of terror, far and wide" (Erasmus 227–29).<sup>13</sup> But, as he writes a little later, there are situations where war is the only solution—for example, when barbarian troops are ready to invade the country. But then the princes, officers, and generals must see to it that the hostilities end as quickly and with as little bloodshed as possible.

The deconstructive impulse in *War Against the Turks* must be understood in the light of the centrality of peace in Erasmus's theology. In *The Complaint of Peace*, Erasmus places great emphasis on understanding Jesus as the "Prince of Peace"; Jesus is the model for peaceful or peacemaking behavior, and, as Murad Idris writes, "[t]o model oneself on Christ demands bonds of mutuality and unity, and it introduces love, friendship, unity and reciprocity into peace" (Idris 147). However, this concept of peace, which refers to the central message of Christian love, presupposes that the enemy must be or become like me. In other words, the enemy, the Turk, must enter the Christian fold, where the Christian shepherd must then fulfill the peacemaking mission that God has assigned to humanity. But, at the same time, converting the Turk is



presented as a mercy killing of the Turk, the enemy, as if Erasmus tries to blur the line between Christian missions and war:

[T]his triumph will be most acceptable to Christ if, instead of slaughtering the Turks, we manage to join them to us in a fellowship of worship and faith. He [Gud] delights in such victories [...] Destroy a Turk to make a Christian, fell and infidel to raise up a true believer: such killing is a work of piety fully acceptable to God. Let it therefore be our only goal, our principal occupation, to extend the kingdom of Christ rather than our own. (Erasmus 242)<sup>14</sup>

Since the bond of friendship that Jesus had with his disciples is the model, peace can only be established if the Turk becomes like the Christian, which he can only become by being exposed to the magical proclamation of the Word of God (the magic comes from the divine origin of the Word: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God”), that is, to Christian missionary activity. Conversion annihilates the half-Christian Turk, who is then reborn in a fully Christian form, purified of all foreignness.

### **Bodin—The Ottoman Sultan as the Exemplary Sovereign**

Erasmus’s contemporary, the French humanist, jurist, and godfather of political sovereignty Jean Bodin (1530–1595), had a different but equally complex view of the Turks. Like Erasmus, he includes the Turks in a wider discussion on some of the most urgent political questions of his time: statecraft, political authority, and religious tolerance. The two never met or exchanged letters, but Erasmus’s *Colloquia Familiaria* (1518 and 1533) is thought to have inspired Bodin’s lesser-known work, *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime* (written in 1587 but not published until 1857), a dialogue that features seven participants from diverse religious backgrounds—Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, Judaism, Islam, Deism, and Naturalism—who, despite their rhetorical prowess, refrain from attempting to convert one another. The fact that conversion is notably absent from their discussions (Heitsch 170) has led Marion Leathers Kuntz, the English translator, to conclude that Bodin saw true religion as inherently tolerant of all faiths (Kuntz 125–44). However, Bodin is also the author of *On the Demon-Mania of Witches* (1580),

one of the primary witch-hunting manuals of his time. This raises important questions about the relationship between his views on demonological witchcraft, his theory of sovereignty, and his ideal of religious tolerance (O'Donnell 531). I will mainly focus on the role of the Turks in his political theory and only touch briefly on his demonology and religious tolerance.

Erasmus and Bodin approached their shared interest in the Turks from vastly different perspectives. Bodin, as a political philosopher deeply immersed in the realities of a nation ravaged by civil war and allied with the Sublime Port in Istanbul, held the Ottomans in high regard. He admired their remarkable capacity to administer an expansive empire and to maintain political stability across its vast territories. This admiration placed him in direct opposition to a deeply entrenched view held by many European observers, including Erasmus, who perceived the Ottoman Empire as a tyrannical regime. This contrast in their perspectives also extended to their differing views on the means of achieving peace, unity, and stability. As we have seen, Erasmus espoused the belief that peace and stability could be attained internally through collective atonement and externally through the dissemination and proclamation of Jesus' message of universal friendship. In stark contrast, Bodin argued that sovereignty was the key to achieving peace and political stability, and the Ottoman Empire was in his view a prime example of this concept in practice. In the Ottoman Empire, the sultan wielded sovereign power in its purest form—unshared with ministers, councils, or parliaments, and unrestrained by external forces such as the privileges and rights enjoyed by the nobility in France.

### The Exemplary Ottoman Sultan

Bodin first laid the groundwork for his concept of sovereignty in *Method for Easy Comprehension of History* (1569) (*Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem*, 1566), in which he integrated the Ottoman Empire into a universal history of governance and statehood.<sup>15</sup> He further elaborated on the concept of sovereignty in his seminal constitutional work, *Six Books on the Commonwealth* (*Les Six Livres de la République*, 1576).<sup>16</sup> Bodin's historiographical and political works reveal his position in the

transition between a theological and a secular understanding of the state. The latter was influenced by the same skepticism that we see in the thinking of Michel de Montaigne, Guillaume Budé, Guillaume du Vair, and Pierre Charron, among others. In *Method for Easy Comprehension of History*, Bodin thus recognizes the difference between the laws that govern the divine (cosmic) and natural order on the one hand and the laws and customs that govern human society on the other. The history of nature and the universe is governed by immutable, eternal causal laws, whereas the laws and customs that govern human history have lost their divine or natural grounding. Human history is shaped by laws that can be traced back to human will. Given that human will is inherently fickle and often lacks a clear purpose, new laws, customs, institutions, and manners will continually emerge. While Montaigne used this mutability against absolute truths, Bodin, who seems to have been more horrified than Montaigne by the bloody unrest of his time, used it as an argument for the establishment of absolute sovereignty. Overall, the concept of sovereignty represents an attempt to anchor political power—and thus the state—in an order that is as stable, absolute and unassailable as the natural and divine order (Engster 478). This simultaneously secular and stable order is to be found through a qualified comparison of the peoples of the world's history to identify the customs, practices, and laws that transcend time and culture. There is thus a close link between Bodin's universal historiographical project in *Method for Easy Comprehension of History* and his political theory, which would be fully developed in *Six Books of the Commonwealth*: The historical method must give an indication of the universal principles of the political order (Engster 479). In the fourth chapter of *Method for Easy Comprehension of History*, after a series of comparisons including the animal, plant, and mineral kingdoms, Bodin states that the universal principle of political order can be summed up in the family: "what is a family other than the true image of a state? Yet this is directed by the rule of one, who presents, not a fictitious image, like the doge of Venice, but the true picture of a King" (*Method for Easy Comprehension* 271).<sup>17</sup> In other words, the state and the sovereign are defined through their imitative relationship with the family and the father, who like the

Roman paterfamilias rules over his slaves, sons, and dependents with unlimited power. As Bodin would explain a few years later in *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, all jurists, canonists, laws, and customs “are undeniable arguments demonstrating the authority, power, and command that the husband holds over the wife by divine and human law, and the subjection, reverence, and obedience that the wife owes to the husband.”<sup>18</sup> Her obedience is equally essential to the very conservation of the states. Regarding the issue of children, Bodin asserts that: “In an orderly republic, it is essential that fathers are given the power of life and death, as granted to them by the laws of God and nature.” He further elaborates that this practice has been observed by the Persians, the people of Turkey, the Hebrews and the West Indians (until the Spanish colonization).<sup>19</sup> What exactly this analogy between the state and the family, the father and the sovereign, means only becomes clear when Bodin moves from ancient examples (Homer, Euripides) to contemporary ones: Suleiman the Magnificent’s infamous murder of his eldest son, Mustapha, in 1552:

What Homer has said, “No good thing is a number of masters; let one man be master, one man be king,” Euripides has repeated, “Power belongs to one man in the homes and in the cities.” [...] In the year 1552 Suleiman made this plain by a memorable example. When Mustapha, his eldest son, had exhausted the resistance of the Persians and had returned without an escort to his father, trusting to a safe-conduct, he was received with such a clamor by the army, with such favor, as no mortal ever had before. His father could not endure his son’s popularity, but ordered him to be strangled in an inner bedroom and then thrown to the army. Thereupon he commanded the herald to proclaim in a loud voice: “There is one God in the heavens; on the earth one man, Suleiman alone, ought to be emperor.” The whole army was silent, struck by terror. Two days later a younger son was carried off by poison because he grieved for his brother’s death. The third, for fear of his father, fled to the king of the Persians. Immediately he was brought back by envoys and beheaded. There remained only the present Selim, whom his father would have threatened if he had not been the surviving son. This was customary among the race of Ottomans, because the hope of empire will come to all, but attainment to one alone. (*Method for Easy Comprehension* 272)<sup>20</sup>

I know of no other European who, like Bodin, celebrated this killing as an expression of a natural political order in which the king's power is absolute, undivided, and therefore sovereign. Most people saw the killing as proof that the Ottoman sultan was a tyrant. But Bodin disagrees with the popular view. According to him, a tyranny is a monarchy in which the ruler abuses his power by violating the property rights of his subjects and attacking foreign nations without a legitimate reason (*Six Books* 31–64). This description was not adequate for the Ottoman Empire. As will be clear from what follows, Suleiman the Magnificent ordered the execution of his son to safeguard the indivisibility of sovereignty and, by extension, the stability of the realm.

In *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, it becomes clear that like medieval political thinking Bodin's theory of sovereignty is also depending on Christian analogies: "He who despises his sovereign prince is also despising God, whose image he is on earth."<sup>21</sup> The domestic authority, that is, the *paterfamilias*, is figured in a similar relation to the divine. Thus, Bodin states, "the father [...] is the true image of Almighty God, the father of all things."<sup>22</sup> Bodin's notion of sovereignty is thus rooted in a sacred trinity of God, state, and family. Richard Ashley rightly asserts that this triadic structure of imitation sets Bodin's theory of statecraft apart from medieval conceptions of political authority, which established legitimacy by "fixing an interpretation of God that the king could mirror and serve" (Ashley, qtd. in O'Donnell 534). Bodin introduces an additional dimension to legitimate political authority, not only by establishing a vision of God (an entity that cannot create an equal to Himself) for the king to emulate but also by fixing a vision of man (the *paterfamilias* of a well-ordered family) that the state is intended to reflect and serve. What does Bodin's demonstration of his concept of indivisible sovereignty through the example of an Ottoman sultan (Suleiman the Magnificent), a Muslim ruler, reveal about the nature and universality of this concept?

## The Myth of Indivisibility

Bodin's vision of God should not be interpreted as a reflection of his entrenchment in Christian metaphysics. Rather, his conception

of God functions as a symbol of “singular power,” or indivisible authority, a principle that the king and the paterfamilias both embody. Consequently, the sultan’s Muslim identity is secondary, if not entirely irrelevant, within this framework. To fully grasp the implications of indivisibility and the exemplary status of the Ottoman sultan, it is crucial to examine Bodin’s interpretation of the killing of Mustapha.

In this instance, the information Bodin had about the murder was not entirely based on fabrication. In fact, Suleiman the Magnificent ordered the execution of his son, officially claiming that the son was plotting to usurp the throne. However, in both Istanbul and Paris, blame was largely attributed to the sultan’s favorite wife, Hürrem, known in Europe as Roxanne, Roxelane, or Rose (Finkel 140). Notably, Bodin refrains from engaging in the widespread Hürrem-bashing. As the most informed expert on Ottoman political realities in the late sixteenth century, Bodin explains the execution by noting that, following his victory over the Persians, Mustapha “was received with such a clamor by the army, with such favor, as no mortal ever had before. His father could not endure his son’s popularity. The father could not tolerate this glory” (*Method for Easy Comprehension* 272). Why not? Bodin suggests the reason for the sultan’s intolerance of his son’s immense popularity among the soldiers by having Suleiman deliver this speech to the army after displaying Mustapha’s dead body: “There is one God in the heavens; on the earth one man, Suleiman alone, ought to be emperor” (272). To this, Bodin adds: “This was customary among the race of Ottomans, because the hope of empire will come to all, but attainment to one alone” (272).

According to Bodin, the sultan perceived Mustapha’s popularity as a form of idolatry and as evidence that his son was in the process of turning the army against him, intending to seize the throne. However, this explanation seems incomplete. Either Bodin does not make an effort to clarify the connection between Mustapha’s popularity and the father’s suspicion or he identifies something inherently problematic in the fact that a future sovereign like Mustapha is being celebrated by his subjects. The issue may lie in the fact that praise reflects gratitude. People honor those who have positively impacted their lives. This recognition

not only shows that the hero, victor, king, or whoever is being celebrated has acted in the interests of others but also that he has considered their needs, feelings, or desires. The celebration reflects gratitude and suggests a sense of dependency and reciprocity, despite the inherent asymmetry of power.

Mustapha's popularity was bolstered by his numerous victories, particularly his recent successes against the Persians, which likely brought significant income in the form of war booty to the Janissaries. It is plausible that Bodin saw the army's tribute as not merely a sign of Mustapha's popularity but also as evidence of a reciprocal, and thus feudal, relationship developing between the sultan's son and his soldiers. As Mireille Hildebrandt asserts, Bodin's sovereign/sultan is not a feudal lord. Indeed, his concept of sovereignty rejects "feudal lordship based on a complex asymmetrical reciprocity" in favor of a "unilateral public competence to enact laws that bind the subjects; the validity of the law does not depend on the consent of those to whom it applies" (qtd. in O'Donnell 544). While Bodin's theory of sovereignty generally oscillates between "reciprocal and nonreciprocal systems of power" (O'Donnell 544), it must be concluded that, in his commentary on the Ottoman sultan, he is firmly within the latter paradigm. The example of Suleiman the Magnificent is employed to demonstrate that for sovereignty to remain indivisible there can be no bonds of consent or reciprocity between the sovereign and his subjects. To ensure the political stability and continuity of the state, the sovereign must be feared by his subjects rather than loved.

### **Powerful Women and Endearing Princes**

I would like to conclude this analysis of Bodin's perspective on the Ottomans by comparing it to the numerous Turkish tragedies penned by French poets between 1562 and 1672. Each of these tragedies features an Ottoman sultan—often Suleiman the Magnificent—depicted either as a tyrannical ruler striving for Bodin-like sovereignty, as a weak ruler dominated by his scheming, tyrannical wife, Roxanne (Hürrem), or as a combination of both. It is hardly necessary to emphasize that, in both cases, the portrayal of the sultan and the sultana is very negative.

Given Bodin's interest in witchcraft, it is intriguing to observe that many Europeans perceived Roxanne as a witch who had bewitched Suleiman, making him see his son as a usurper to the throne (Yermolenko 25), a notion that Bodin apparently did not share. Although the Turkish tragedies did not explicitly portray Roxanne as a witch, they did depict her as an ambitious woman who attained political power in the only way available to a woman—through plotting and scheming. Rebecca Wilkin captures the gendered dynamics in *Six Books of the Commonwealth* and *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, stating that: "Rule by women leads to the annihilation of the state, while women's knowledge of the occult heralds the decadence of the moral universe" (Wilkin 74–75). Although Bodin did not hold Roxanne responsible for the murder of Mustapha, there is little doubt that he might have viewed her as a witch-like figure.

How the female ruler—and a prince who is loved by his subjects—lead to the annihilation of the state can, however, be studied in *Bajazet* (1672), Jean Racine's first and only Turkish tragedy based on the accounts of Murad IV's (alias Amurat) execution of his younger brother Bajazet in 1638. *Bajazet* can be interpreted as an attempt to align the dramatic portrayal of the sultan—the sovereign—with the phantasm of sovereignty by warning against women with political ambitions and rulers who are loved by their subjects. The tragedy revolves around the power struggles within Sultan Amurat's court in Constantinople. Bajazet is imprisoned by his brother but the sultan's favorite, Roxane, loves him and plans to overthrow the sultan with his help, while the sultan wages war against the Persians in Baghdad. The people also love Bajazet and have high hopes for his rise to power, while the protagonist himself is hesitant and ambivalent about the coup plans. Meanwhile, Atalide, who is in love with Bajazet, and the former grand vizier, Acomat, are also involved in the plot. As the intrigue unfolds, betrayal and misunderstandings lead to a tragic end, with Bajazet and Roxane meeting their demise and Atalide taking her own life in despair. Before the tragedy comes to an end, it is revealed that the deaths of Bajazet, Roxane, and Acomat were orchestrated by Sultan Amurat, who remains in Baghdad, where he secures a great victory for the Ottomans. Thus,



Amurat never appears on stage and does not have a single line in the tragedy—the audience “knows” him solely through his actions: the imprisonment of his younger brother and the cold-blooded order to slaughter the conspirators. However, it would be a mistake to view Amurat—the unlovable, terrifying sovereign—as a purely negative character. To protect himself from a grueling civil war, he imprisoned his brother and ultimately condemned him to death; to strengthen the army and consolidate his power, he dismissed the old, decrepit grand vizier from command of the Janissaries; and to expand the empire, he left the seraglio—the locus of love—for distant Baghdad, the locus of killing and dying; and to make his power more effective he replaced his physical presence with a network of spies—black eunuchs—who keep him informed of the developments in the seraglio. Rather than the angry, self-assertive tyrant seen in other Turkish tragedies, Amurat resembles a ruler who will sacrifice everything to safeguard the stability and unity of the kingdom. His only, though very serious, misstep was granting his favorite wife political authority in his absence. However, after having killed the characters who embodied his relations of blood, love, and reciprocity, Amurat has established himself within the nonreciprocal power system of the sovereign.

## Conclusion

This chapter has sought to uncover the complex dimensions of Renaissance humanism by exploring its entanglements with Turcophobia and crusading ideologies, particularly in the works of Erasmus and Bodin. By shifting the focus from the content of humanist commentary on the Turks to the broader political and cultural discussions in which these discourses were embedded, we have seen how humanists used the figure of the Turk not merely as the “other” to be feared or despised but as a rhetorical tool and an inspiration in their deliberations on war, morality, and sovereignty.

Erasmus, despite his Turcophobic rhetoric, envisioned the Turk as a potential Christian, suggesting that conversion, rather than war, was the ultimate solution to the Turkish threat. His views underscore a tension between the dehumanizing stereotypes of the time and a recognition of common humanity, revealing an underlying complexity in his thought.

Bodin, on the other hand, admired the Ottoman Empire's stability and the sultan's sovereign power, which he saw as a model for absolute authority. His commentary on the execution of Suleiman the Magnificent's son Mustapha demonstrates his belief in the necessity of indivisible sovereignty to maintain political stability, even if it means resorting to brutal measures. Bodin's use of the Ottoman example reveals another facet of orientalism—one that does not simply vilify but also idealizes certain aspects of Ottoman governance to serve his arguments about statecraft and sovereignty.

In juxtaposing Erasmus and Bodin, this study highlights the nuanced and multifaceted ways in which humanists engaged with the idea of the Turk. Rather than a monolithic discourse of fear and contempt, their writings reveal a broader, more intricate dialogue that used the figure of the Turk to explore and articulate some of the most pressing political and moral issues of their time. This "other orientalism" within humanism invites us to reconsider the legacy of Renaissance thought, acknowledging its complexities and contradictions as it grappled with the realities of an expanding world.

## Endnotes

1. "Hic urget aliquis, quid, inquiens, agis hoc tam prolixo sermone? Die exerte, censes bellandum an non?" (*Consultatio de bello Turcis inferendo* 81; all Latin quotations cited below are from this work).
2. "Regnant irato Deo [...] Nostris vitiis illi debent suas victorias" (50 and 52).
3. "Bellis, lactrocinis, ciuilibus tumultibus, factionibus, expilationibus, penuriae, fami, in tantum assueuimus, ut iam pro malis non habeantur" (31).
4. "Huiusmodi calamitates quibus subinde tangimur, nihil aliud sunt, quam voces Domini ad se reuocantis" (34).
5. "Ecclesiae pastores immane quantum degenerarunt ab archetypo suo" (61).
6. "siue quia non Christi negocium egimus, sed aduersus Turcas animo Turcica pugnauimus" (38).
7. "Gens est effoeminata luxu, nec alia re quam latrociniiis formidanda" (52).

8. "Iisdem enim studiis arma movemus in Turcas, quibus illi ditiones alienas occupant. Trahimur regnandi libidine, inhiamus opibus, et ut dicam in summa, Turcae pugnamus cum Turcis. Quin ipsa rerum gestarum historia satis indicat, nostris dissidiis, nostra ambitione, nostratium perfidia gravissimis cladibus semper fuisse datum locum. Palaeologi cum Cantacuzeno implacabile dissidium Turcis aditum aperuit in Europam" (52).

9. "hoc genus hominum, cuius immanitate tot seculis affigitur et atteritur res christiana" (39).

10. "Quum imperita multitudo Turcarum nomen audit, protinus concipit animo graues iras, et ad caedem inflammatur, canes et christiani nominis hastes illos vociferans" (52).

11. "At christianorum vulgus perperam existimat, cuius licere Turcam non aliter occidere quam canem rabidum, non ob aliud nisi quia Turca est [...] Proinde misere se fallunt, qui se credunt recta subuolaturos in coelum, si contingat in praelio aduersum Turcos cadere" (58).

12. "Si nobis succedere cupimus, ut Turcas a nostris ceruicibus depellamus, prius teterrimum Turcarum genus ex animis nostris exigamus, auaritiam, ambitionem, dominandi libidinem, nostri fiduciam, impietatem, luxum, voluptatum amorem, fraudulentiam, iram, odium, inuidiam, et his gladio Spiritus iugulatis sumamus animum vere christianum, atque ita si respostulet sub vexillis Christi militemus aduersus Turcas homines, et eodem propugnatore vincemus" (62).

13. "Nos inter nos sine fine de qualibet ditiuncula bellis plus quam ciuilibus digladiamur, et interim Turcarum latrocinium verius quam imperium, quam late porrectum est" (48).

14. "Tum autem fuerit Christo gratissimus triumphus, si hoc egerimus, non tam ut illos occidamus, quam ut eos in religionis ac pietatis consortium adiungamus. Tales victorias amat qui gaudet seruatoris cognomine [...] Pium Deoque gratissimum est homicidium, sic iugulare Turcam ut existat christianus, sic deicere impium ut exoriatur pius" (62).

15. Bodin's *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* was first translated into French in 1941 by Pierre Mesnard.

16. The only unabridged English translation of *Les Six Livres de la République* is Richard Knolles's *Six Books of the Commonwealth*

from 1608. As it is very difficult to read, I have taken the liberty of producing my own English translations from the 1986 French edition.

17. “Mais pour chercher une comparaison plus proche, la famille n’est-elle point l’image authentique de l’Etat? Or elle repose sur l’autorité d’un seul chef qui est la véritable incarnation du pouvoir monarchique, et non pas un vain simulacre, comme le doge de Venise” (*La Méthode de l’histoire* 266).

18. “aussi toutes les loix et coustumes ont faict le mari maistre des actions de la femme [...] et ne permettent que la femme puisse estre en jugement, soit en demandant ou defendant, sans l’autorité du mari, ou du juge a son refus: qui sont tous arguments indubitables pour montre l’autorité, puissance, et commandement, que le mari a sur la femme de droit divin et human: et la subjection, reverence, et obeissance, que doit la femme au mari” (*Six Livres* I 62).

19. “il est besoin en la Republique bien ordonnee, rendre aux peres la puissance de la vie et de la mort, que la loy de Dieu et de nature leur donne” (*Six Livres* I 66).

20. “[...] la parole d’Homère: ‘Il n’est pas bon que plusieurs commandent; qu’un seul soit chef, qu’un seul soit roi!’ Euripide nous la confirme: ‘Le gouvernement des maisons et des ville doit être le fait d’un seul homme.’ [...] Cette nécessité d’un pouvoir unique, Soliman devait la manifester d’une manière memorable, en 1552. Son fils aîné Mustapha, après avoir vaincu les Perses, revenait sans escorte et sous la protection de la parole paternelle, lorsqu’il reçut de la part de l’armée un tel tribute d’ovations et de louanges que jamais prince n’en connut de semblable. Le père ne put se résoudre à tolérer cette gloire. Il ordonna en consequence de faire étrangler le prince dans une chambre secrete et de presenter le cadaver à l’armée, tandis qu’un héraut d’armes publiait à haute voix: “Il ne doit y avoir qu’un seul Dieu dans le Ciel, et sur la terre, un seul sultan, Soliman!” Et l’armée atterrée restait anéantie. Mais Soliman ne devait pas en rester là. Deux jours après il faisait empoisonner son fils cadet, pour avoir pleuré la mort de son frère; le troisième, fuyant la colère paternelle, s’était réfugié auprès du roi de Perse; mais il fut assitôt appelé par des émissaires et décapité. Il ne restait plus que Sélim, celui que nous connaissons, mais son père n’entreprit rien contre lui pour ne pas rester sans postérité. Une telle conduit est d’ailleurs frequente chez les Ottomans, car beaucoup caressent l’espoir de la couronne mais elle n’échoit qu’un seul” (*La Method de l’histoire* 266).

21. “qui mesprise son Prince souverain, il mesprise Dieu, duquel il est l’image en terre” (*Six Livres* 1 295).

22. “[le] pere, qui est la vraye image du grand Dieu souverain, pere universel de toutes choses” (*Six Livres* 1 63).

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## 7. Planetary Subjectivity in the Theaters of Margaret Cavendish

Alexander Paulsson Lash

### Summary

In her philosophical writings, Margaret Cavendish presents nature as a material, self-moving, and self-knowing whole, which means that true knowledge involves understanding the interrelations among the parts of nature, including the subject's own position as a part of nature. This chapter explores how these philosophical models are given shape in Cavendish's drama, especially her final play, *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668). Cavendish treats the play's enclosed spaces as models of planetary totality, in which her philosophically questing heroines can explore how to connect their own local subjectivity to the infinite variety of nature.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

As an epigraph to his recent study of how scholars in the humanities might respond to the Anthropocene, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Dipesh Chakrabarty quotes the reflections of Baruch Spinoza on what it means to face a global catastrophe. These remarks come from a letter that Spinoza wrote in the autumn of 1665 to Henry Oldenburg, secretary of the recently founded English scientific institution, the Royal Society. At the time, England and the Dutch Republic were at war—a war driven in large part by imperial competition over colonies in the Americas—so Spinoza expresses his hope that Oldenburg and his intellectual companions are well despite the bloodthirstiness of soldiers, which prompts his reflections on the nature of humanity:

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Yet these disorders do not move me to laughter or even to tears, but rather to philosophizing, and to the better observation of human nature. For I do not think it right for me to laugh at nature, much less to weep over it, when I consider that men like the rest are only a part of nature and that I do not know how each individual part of nature is related to the whole, nor how it is joined to the rest. (541)<sup>2</sup>

Although Chakrabarty does not develop a reading of Spinoza, his epigraph points to the value of turning to the 1660s as an important moment for formulating and understanding the challenges that face us today. In Chakrabarty's account, our rising awareness of the influence that we humans as a species have had on the planet demands new ways of thinking. It is no longer sufficient for us to think only of globalization as a process that has tied together human societies in various kinds of hierarchical and oppressive structures; we must also think about how humanity as a whole has become a planetary force, remaking the climate and the conditions of survival for all living things on earth. Spinoza models one way of making this movement in his letter to Oldenburg, as he dismisses the present conflict among states, embracing instead a metaphysical vision of nature as a unified whole.

The development of this monist materialism, describing all of nature as a single substance, would take up much of Spinoza's philosophical career. His interest in "the better observation of human nature" and the relationship of humans to nature would seem to suggest close shared interests with the mechanist experimental philosophers of the Royal Society. Despite its polite tone, however, his correspondence with Oldenburg reveals profound differences in their respective approaches to gaining knowledge about nature. Oldenburg cheerfully reported to Spinoza that the society was "confining itself to experiments and observations and avoiding the intricacies of disputation" (99), and he sent a copy of Robert Boyle's 1661 book of chemical experiments, *Certain Physiological Essays*. Spinoza responded with a detailed critique of Boyle's experiments with nitrous gases, delivered almost simultaneously with Thomas Hobbes's critique of Boyle's experiments with the air-pump. The latter received an extremely influential interpretation in Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's

*Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, which used Hobbes's attack to reveal how Boyle's experiments relied on social conventions of persuasion. Bruno Latour, in *We Have Never Been Modern*, built on Shapin and Schaffer's work to suggest that the Boyle–Hobbes debate marked the origin of the imagined modern constitution that separated nature and culture into two separate realms. This focus on the separation of a social, human, scientific practice and the natural object of that science, we might suggest, stands in the position of inquiry into social and human globalization in Chakrabarty's argument.

Spinoza's critique suggests an alternate set of terms for understanding the nature of the modern science that is traditionally seen as arising in Boyle's experimental practice, an understanding focused on the question of how science positions us humans in relation to the nature that we scientifically study and observe. Spinoza wants, in Chakrabarty's terms, to develop a planetary science, a way of perceiving humanity as an integrated part of a totalized nature. In the practice of Boyle and his fellows in the Royal Society, the challenge is instead how to purify individual objects of study, to frame them and separate them inside an experimental apparatus.<sup>3</sup> It is this separation of objects that Spinoza finds so troubling, as he makes clear in a later letter to Oldenburg. Every body, every physical object or being, including individual humans, "is a part of the whole universe, agrees with its whole, and is related to the other parts" (Oldenburg 601). The "human mind too," Spinoza continues, "is a part of the universe," so our knowledge of the world or any object within it is itself part of the self-knowledge of infinite nature. Spinoza gives Oldenburg a thought example to help him better imagine this ultimate reality, picturing a microscopic creature living inside a human body:

Let us now if you please imagine that a little worm lives in this fluid (that is, the blood) [that] worm would live in the blood as we do in this part of the universe and would judge each particle of the blood to be a whole, not a part. And it could not know how all the parts are controlled by the general nature of the blood and are compelled to adapt themselves one to another, as the general nature of the blood requires, so as to harmonize together in a certain way. (Oldenburg 600)<sup>4</sup>

Our own perceptual powers are like those of the little worm, only able to judge the things around us as individual and separate objects, rather than experience the totality of which they form a part. To see all the infinite parts of nature in their infinite variety and on infinite scales, from the subvisible to the cosmic, is impossible from within the perceptual apparatus of any individual subject. Through the generation of his fictional model, Spinoza begins to develop a planetary perspective—a perspective focused on how all the seemingly individual subjects in the world are integrated in the totality of unified nature, figured here as the body inside which the worm lives.

Spinoza's worm in the blood is fairly unusual as a moment of fiction in his work, but we might turn to a contemporary of his who not only developed a strikingly similar philosophical critique of the Royal Society's experimental program but who also generated a mass of fictional experiments for presenting and imagining a planetary vision of humanity as a part of nature. Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, was among the most prolific English authors of the seventeenth century, writing across a range of genres, including lyric poetry, romances, philosophical treatises, and most famously the scientific utopia *The Blazing World*. Similarly to Spinoza, her philosophical vision developed in part as a response to writings of figures in the Royal Society, especially in her 1666 *Observations on Experimental Philosophy*.<sup>5</sup> The knowledge of individual objects generated under the experimental conditions of their developing scientific practices does not count as true knowledge, in Cavendish's view, for knowledge properly involves an understanding of how an object comes to be, and its relationship to other parts of nature.<sup>6</sup> True knowledge instead belongs to nature itself: "[S]ince nature is but one body, it is entirely wise and knowing, ordering her self-moving parts with all facility and ease, without any disturbance, living in pleasure and delight, with infinite varieties and curiosities, such as no single part or creature of hers can ever attain to" (*Observations* 48). Humans can only come to have knowledge because we are parts of nature and its infinite varieties. If Cavendish's philosophical thinking thus proves strikingly similar to that of Spinoza, her fecund generation of literary fictions allows her to model what it

might look like to imaginatively expand our subjective experience into nature's singular body.

## Models of Infinite Nature

In this chapter, I focus on how such imaginative modeling appears in Cavendish's dramatic writings. Theater is a profoundly spatial art form, generating scenes where bodies, thoughts, and fictions can become entangled with the world. Although her plays do not appear to have been performed in her lifetime, Cavendish wrote them with a creative interest in how to imagine their theatrical spaces. Some of her most interesting plays take place inside enclosed fictional worlds that she treats as models of a planetary totality, in which her philosophically questing heroines can explore how to connect their own local subjectivity to the infinite variety of nature.

I use the term "model" to capture the fact that the planetary can never be known or perceived directly, either in Cavendish's time or in ours. Our knowledge of earth's climate, and of the historical transformation of that climate in anthropogenic global warming, depends not only on massive amounts of weather measurements made all across the planet but also on computer models that can translate that data into a unified picture. As Paul N. Edwards shows in his history of the global networks that created our knowledge of climate change, *A Vast Machine*, meteorologists "need models to adjust for the tremendous unevenness of observations in space and time. In this process [...] coherent global data images are created from highly heterogeneous, time-varying observations" (xv). Obviously, Cavendish had access neither to these vast amounts of data nor to computer models that could make sense of the data. These limitations, simply put, mean that her knowledge of planetary systems was far less precise than what scientists have access to today. Nevertheless, she had an extraordinary awareness of how knowledge can be built out of the interconnections among various domains that her contemporaries in the Royal Society were beginning to separate into distinct scientific disciplines, and she aimed to generate models for perceiving such interconnections. Her insistence on treating humans as

material parts of nature speaks directly to our own Anthropocene moment and the posthuman turn, as scholars including Mihoko Suzuki, Aaron Hanlon, and Liza Blake have recently shown.<sup>7</sup> Turning to her plays, I argue here that she became increasingly attuned to how a knowledge of nature demands multiple models and translations among those models. She published two large folio collections of her drama, *Playes* in 1662 and *Plays, Never Before Printed* in 1668. The philosophically oriented plays in the first volume, with titles like *Lady Contemplation*, *The Female Academy*, and *Youth's Glory and Death's Banquet*, feature thinly disguised versions of Cavendish herself in spaces set aside for giving orations, orations that occasionally describe her vision of nature as a whole. This focus on orations means that the model of nature is largely discursive, but I will focus here on her final play, *The Convent of Pleasure*, where she generates a structure for enacting her philosophical vision onstage, bringing multiple models of nature into the theatrical space, and attempting to collapse the distance among them.

There is a risk in too enthusiastically embracing a singular writer's imaginative capacity to encompass this planetary perspective, and Cavendish scholars have long debated the extent to which her work serves to celebrate aristocratic privileges.<sup>8</sup> Some time ago, Julie Crawford exhaustively demonstrated that *The Convent of Pleasure* was, in its local context, "a political intervention" making "its own case for the restoration of the privileges and status of the nobility, including, even especially, the Cavendishes themselves" (179). Along with this material investment in aristocratic politics, Cavendish's crafting of her own strikingly original self-presentation both in her writing and in her appearance—she was notorious in her lifetime for the "singularity" of her dress<sup>9</sup>—has been understood as a way to defend the merit of her elite social class. In a recent study of race-thinking in Cavendish's early plays, Sujata Iyengar has contrasted how Cavendish positions herself as transcending race through merit and cultivation, while she simultaneously works to "humiliate and racialize [her] working-class characters" (96). It seems to me that Cavendish's constant insistence on her own aristocratic originality is one central strand in the planetary subjectivity that I am unpacking in

this chapter. She is, on this reading, the individual who has developed the literary techniques and philosophical sophistication to come the closest to perceiving nature in its totality. In developing our own thinking about the state of the planet, we would do well to guard against this type of arrogance, a belief that our posthumanist originality allows us to grasp the future of nature. By exploring Cavendish's models of the natural world, however, I hope to seek out moments where individual subjectivity slips away. Sophia Richardson has recently noted that there is an "unresolved tension between Cavendish's delight in singularity and her philosophical commitment to monist materialism" (283), and it is in that unresolved tension that we might locate a planetary subjectivity. On the one hand, Cavendish gives us a celebration of her own subjective insight into the natural world, but the insight itself demands a turn away from that individual subjectivity and toward the model of nature as a planetary totality.

### Pastoral Visions

Cavendish's delight in her own singularity resided above all in her vision of herself as an original writer, and in her first volume of plays she experimented with framing her rhetorical skill. *The Female Academy*, for instance, is built around long orations on topics like rhetoric, feminine comportment, and the theater, which are delivered by "a company of young Ladies" (*Playes* 653) inside a single-sex space where the women take turns giving speeches. Much of the play's comedy is generated by the contrast with a group of young men who decide to organize a competing male academy nearby, but who are only able to deliver repetitive speeches on the beauty of women. This dueling series of speeches allows Cavendish, as author, to display her own skill as a rhetorician. The speeches become more philosophically ambitious in another play from the same volume, *Youths Glory and Deaths Banquet*, where all the orations are delivered by a singular stand-in for Cavendish herself, Lady Sanspareille. Again, there is a humorous contrast with men, here a group of old philosophers who doubt Sanspareille's capacities and claim that "Philosophers should be men of yeares [...] with long wise beards, sprinkled

with gray" (*Playes* 134). Cavendish highlights the singularity of Sanspareille's philosophical insight by positioning her above these listeners (who of course will be completely bowled over) in a "place raised and railed with guilt rayles" (*Playes* 135). The basic theatrical scene, in this early mode of Cavendish's drama, is one in which philosophy is delivered from on high.

While the spaces that Cavendish imagines in the 1662 volume serve primarily as a background for her heroines' rhetorical performances, she works in her later drama to more fully integrate the theatrical scene into her model of the infinitely various material unity of the natural world. Like *The Female Academy*, *The Convent of Pleasure* takes place largely inside a single-sex space where women can engage in philosophical speculation, but Cavendish now combines this intellectual inquiry with practices of living in tune with the seasonal rhythms of nature. The convent is more than an enclosure designed to keep out men. It is an expansive space in which to seek out the simultaneously sensuous and rational pleasures that nature offers, pleasures that can be accessed in a utopian world of female collaboration. Lady Happy's convent "has so much compass of ground within her walls, as there is not only room and place enough for Gardens, Orchards, Walks, Groves, Bowers, Arbours, Ponds, Fountains, Springs, and the like; but also conveniency for much Provision, and hath women for every Office and Employment" (*Convent* 223). It is as if a unified model of the natural world has been set up here, where the women can experiment with how to encounter nature. Cavendish ties this encounter to the rhythms of climate, as Lady Happy proclaims how she has "order'd this our *Convent of Pleasure*" for its residents, with the furnishings of their rooms, their fashionable garments, and their diets, changing "according to the four Seasons of the year" (*Convent* 224). The almost ostentatious focus on sensuous pleasures here might seem to represent a swerve away from Cavendish's philosophical style of drama in her earlier volume of plays, but it instead provides an intensification of her materialist vision of intellectual activity. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, Cavendish presents a utopian model of women living, working, and speaking inside a harmonious model of nature, transforming their philosophical speculation into one material part of the natural world.

Cavendish positions this model of nature in relation to the pastoral tradition, but she also treats that tradition as a seemingly separate model of its own. The convent is not a pastoral setting in the traditional sense: it is not a forest in which shepherds tend their flocks. Instead, Lady Happy and her community of women stage pastoral scenes inside the convent, as they dress up as shepherds and shepherdesses and act out rural games of wooing. Through these metatheatrical performances, Cavendish playfully recreates and revises the pastoral world of the English theater, especially as she knew it in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.<sup>10</sup> What Cavendish takes from Shakespearean pastoral, above all, is an exploration of gender through cross-dressing. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind's entry to the Forest of Arden is accompanied by her dressing up as a male shepherd, Ganymede, but she then pretends to be the female Rosalind as she trains her beloved Orlando in how he should treat her in their future marriage. Cavendish repeats this type of layered cross-dressing in the character of the Princess, who has joined the convent and developed an intimate friendship with Lady Happy. The play ends with the revelation that this princess has been a prince in disguise, but along the way the Princess appears—in an inversion of Ganymede dressing as Rosalind—in “*Masculine Shepherd's Clothes*” (*Convent* 234). While the eventual revelation of the Princess's maleness and the concluding marriage with Lady Happy marks an end to the single-sex space of the convent, scholars have also located an attempt here to imagine a transformative potential in the encounter between the two women. Valerie Billing, for instance, suggests that Cavendish experiments “with ways in which a marriage could become a collaboration of bodiless souls rather than a sexual hierarchy” (96), and Alexandra Verini finds a utopian possibility in allowing readers to “linger on a glimpse of something else,” a world in which women's intimate friendships will be recognized as especially productive forms of relation (176).<sup>11</sup> I would add that putting two women into intimate conversation allows Cavendish to go beyond the philosophical model of the world in her earlier plays like *Youths Glory and Death's Banquet*. While Lady Sanspareille stands alone, propounding her doctrines from on high, Lady Happy and the Princess share their entanglement with the natural world, and thereby grow further entangled with each other, developing a shared subjectivity.



Cavendish draws on the pastoral tradition's settings in natural spaces, but she also notices that pastoral in practice tends to use these natural settings mainly to frame social relationships among humans. The metatheatrical pastoral play of *The Convent of Pleasure* opens with two male shepherds—presumably played by women who have dressed up for their parts—wooing Lady Happy, the first speaking of how his flock of sheep is threatened by his amorous heartache, and the second promising that he will labor on her farm. Happy will have none of this, exclaiming her hope that “the Winds might blow them far, / That no Love-Suit might enter my Ear” (*Convent* 235). Moving beyond these conventional tropes of pastoral verse, the Princess and Lady Happy praise each other in long speeches of natural philosophy, and it is in these speeches that Cavendish gives *The Convent of Pleasure's* fullest expression of her philosophical views. Where Sanspareille's orations and the speeches in *The Female Academy* had been written in prose, essentially copying Cavendish's earlier philosophical writings into the theatrical text, the philosophical ideas here are conveyed in long poetic speeches set in verse. At the conclusion of these speeches, the pastoral play closes with Lady Happy and the Princess promising each other marriage, as the Princess boasts that “In amorous Pastoral Verse we did not Woo. / As other Pastoral Lovers use to doo” (*Convent* 237–38). This contrast—between more refined, elite characters who experience true love while playing at being shepherds and the simpler, coarser expression of love from actual shepherds—is a regular feature of pastoral. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare contrasts the poetic complexity of Rosalind and Orlando's developing love with the apparent simplicity of the rustics Sylvius and Phoebe, whose wooing is disrupted by the arrival of Rosalind in her guise as Ganymede. But Cavendish is giving this pastoral tradition her own philosophical twist. Inside the convent's pastoral theater, the two women come together to generate new models for understanding the world.

## Planetary Subjectivities

The model that Cavendish has the Princess and Lady Happy generate in these speeches is a planetary one, attempting to imagine the world as a whole, and it is in this attempt that her distance from

Shakespeare appears. *As You Like It* is deeply attuned to how its characters imagine their relationships to the local world of the forest, making it a central text for early modern ecocriticism.<sup>12</sup> In the first scene set in the forest, for instance, Duke Senior “Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything” (II.i.16–17), while the melancholy Jaques observes a stag that is dying from a hunter’s arrow, which “Stood on th’extremest verge of the swift brook, / Augmenting it with tears” (42–43). Between the Duke’s celebration of the messages of goodness in the trees and Jaques’s passionate response to a grieving animal, Shakespeare explores different possible attitudes toward the local environment.

Cavendish’s Lady Happy and Princess instead direct their attention away from their local situation in the convent, as they collaboratively seek out how the different parts of nature interact and entwine. The Princess begins by praising Happy’s capacity to take a planetary perspective, with her intelligence able to perceive the cosmos as a whole:

My Shepherdess, your Wit flies high,  
Up to the Skie,  
And views the Gates of Heaven,  
Which are the Planets Seven;  
Sees how fixt Stars are Plac’d,  
And how the Meteors wast;  
What makes the Snow so white,  
And how the Sun makes light. (*Convent* 235)

Throughout this speech, the Princess imagines Happy’s wit as able to move through the different scales and parts of nature. In these opening lines, she draws together the planets, meteors, stars, and sun, and she proceeds to the atmosphere of our own planet (“what makes Lightning flow / Like liquid streams” (*Convent* 236)), a planet that she observes to be teeming with all kinds of life:

From Skie you come to th’Earth,  
And view each Creature’s birth;  
Sink to the Center deep,  
Where all dead bodies sleep;  
And there observe to know,  
What makes the Minerals grow;

How Vegetables sprout,  
 And how the Plants come out;  
 Take notice of all Seed,  
 And what the Earth doth breed. (*Convent* 236)

Happy's power as a natural philosopher does not reside in focusing on singular problems or objects, and the speech here moves too quickly to suggest any individual insights. Rather, this movement—from the cosmos to the sky, to the surface of the earth, and into the ground beneath our feet—is the corollary of Cavendish's monist materialism. Because all of nature is a single, infinitely various, unified whole, Lady Happy's insight resides in her capacity to imagine how its parts interact.

Cavendish also works to present this natural-philosophical exploration as itself a material part of the unified nature that is being explored. Not only does the Princess praise Lady Happy's philosophical skill but Happy in turn praises the Princess's insight into human life: "Your Wit doth search Mankind, / In Body and in Mind" (*Convent* 237). Similar to how the Princess sees Lady Happy seek out connections among the parts of the natural world, Happy sees the Princess tracking the connections among "Passion," "Humor's fashion," "Thought," "Opinions," "Memorie's strength," and more (*Convent* 237). By pairing these two speeches, Cavendish joins the two modes or levels of exploration. Understanding humans and understanding nature are not separate activities, since Cavendish does not see humans as separate from or able to master nature. This interpenetration of the human and the natural is expressed in the alternate pastoral love between the Princess and Lady Happy. After the Princess celebrates how they did not woo as typical shepherds, she continues that the two women will "Join as one Body and Soul, or Heav'nly Spirit" (*Convent* 238). The two becoming one, this perfect marriage, reflects the unification of the questing philosophical mind with the infinite variety of nature.<sup>13</sup>

## Theatrical Globes

The doubling of philosophical women provides one feature of Cavendish's attempt to craft a more integrated model of planetary

nature in *The Convent of Pleasure*. She also thinks about how the theatrical space itself can provide such a model. While the earlier plays like *The Female Academy* and *Youths Glory and Death's Banquet* had largely been taken up with the delivery of orations, *The Convent of Pleasure* stages a whole series of metatheatrical performances. In her depiction of the convent, she includes a theater with changeable painted scenery, which had become standard in the London theaters since the Restoration in 1660. Cavendish's husband had written or sponsored plays performed in these theaters, so she would have been accustomed to observing the workings of the painted scenery. Such scenery worked to frame characters as self-contained objects inside the theatrical apparatus, and *The Convent of Pleasure* occasionally uses the scenery in this conventional manner.<sup>14</sup> The first of the plays-within-the-play presents a collection of brief pedagogical plays that reveal why marriage is bad for women. For this performance, Cavendish envisions Lady Happy and the Princess as spectators in a theater with changeable scenery: "*The Scene is opened, the PRINCESS and the L. HAPPY sit down, and the Play is Acted within the Scene; the PRINCESS and the L. HAPPY being spectators*" (Convent 229). Here, the presence of painted scenery works to establish that a theatrical frame has been provided for a playlet about husbands who waste their money gambling or wives who risk death in childbirth. When the "scene is opened," the space inside the scenic frame has been designated as separate, so that, if *The Convent of Pleasure* were staged, Lady Happy and the Princess, outside the scene, are in the play's "real" convent, while the playlet on marriage is set apart in a fictional and allegorical space.

As Lady Happy and the Princess continue their theatrical experiments, however, the distinction between the space of the convent and its theater begins to collapse. Cavendish now opens scenes that bring the world of nature into the space of the convent, beginning with the pastoral in which the two women deliver their long philosophical speeches: "*The Scene is open'd and the PRINCESS and L. HAPPY go in. A Pastoral within the Scene. The Scene is changed into a Green, or Plain, where Sheep are feeding, and a MAY-POLE in the middle. L. HAPPY as a Shepherdess, and the PRINCESS as a Shepherd are sitting there*" (Convent 234–35).

Where the women previously sat outside the scene, looking in on a theatrical scene inside the area opened up by the sliding shutters, they have now moved inside. This movement begins to collapse the distinction between an artificial, theatrical space and a natural one, providing a spatial echo of the pairing of natural and human in the speeches. This long stage direction describing the scenery would seem to suggest that theatrical representation creates artificial spaces, but as Lady Happy and the Princess enter the scene they quickly turn to their philosophical explorations of nature. For these explorations to be complete, the distinction between different parts of the material world must be collapsed. After the two central characters have won a dancing competition and been crowned with flowers, a stage direction notes that “*The Scene Vanishes*,” followed by each of the two women entering alone and musing on the love that is starting to blossom between them (*Convent* 239). If Cavendish were a more conventional playwright, we might imagine her noting here “the scene changes to the convent” to signal how the women are moving between the artificial pastoral scene and a more naturalistic space. By instead claiming that the theatrical scene vanishes, she tests the possibility of drawing connections among different models of nature, as the boundaries among seemingly distinct spaces dissolve. Readers are given three such models here: the convent itself, with its seasonally appropriate furnishings and abundant gardens; the pastoral landscape, with its dancing shepherds and shepherdesses; and the poetic speeches, with their magnificent vision of the cosmos. Cavendish refuses to keep these models separate, inviting readers to see them as interpenetrating parts of nature itself, finding diverse expression in her imaginative worldmaking.

Cavendish could have found examples of such vanishing scenery in earlier traditions of court performance. John Shanahan notes that the spectacular performances of *The Convent of Pleasure* draw on the tradition of masques created by Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones at the courts of James and Charles I, which “regularly use the word ‘vanish’ in stage directions,” and he argues that Cavendish was inspired by these masques to present performance as a form of magic, capable of manipulating and controlling nature. Shanahan finds a “stress on hidden mechanism” and

“high-tech spectacularity” that links Cavendish’s play to masques like Jonson’s 1618 *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (153). Brandie Siegfried, however, has argued that Cavendish’s open celebration of sensual pleasure signals a rejection of the vision of Jonson’s masque, which, she playfully suggests, “might have been more appropriately titled, *Virtue’s Triumph*” in its refusal of pleasure (68). Indeed, the moment of vanishing scenery in *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* comes when Hercules defeats Comus, the god of revelry and sensual pleasure, roaring that “here must be no shelter, nor no shroud / For such [revelers]. Sink, grove, or vanish into cloud!” (Jonson 94–95). Where Jonson’s earlier version of this theatrical technique signals the triumph of virtue over vicious modes of pleasure, Cavendish’s vanishing scenery signals the dissolving of boundaries among different models of nature.

Cavendish draws inspiration from another play as she incorporates a shimmering, vanishing theatrical model into her play’s larger world. Shakespeare’s 1611 *The Tempest*, which itself responds to and queries the limitations of the masque tradition, twice notes in its stage directions how a metatheatrical reality “vanishes.” First, the spirit Ariel brings out a sumptuous banquet in front of the shipwrecked noblemen who had betrayed Prospero before the action of the play. As the hungry men reach for the magical food, “*Enter ARIEL, like a harpy; claps his wings upon the table, and with a quaint device the banquet vanishes*” (III. iii.53.SD). Although there is clearly an element of moralistic rejection of vice here, Siegfried locates a precursor of *The Convent of Pleasure* in the “awareness of the need for transformation and reconciliation” that the Duke and courtiers experience in response (69). Even more, it is in the pastoral marriage masque that follows this scene that Cavendish would have found a model for her own theatrical modeling of worlds. In the masque itself, Iris, goddess of the rainbow, and Ceres, goddess of agriculture, pray for a bountiful marital union of Prospero’s daughter Miranda and the future King Ferdinand, followed by a dance between pastoral nymphs and rustic reapers. This magically charged pastoral world cannot last and, as Prospero remembers the uprising of the enslaved native Caliban, “*PROSPERO starts suddenly and speaks, after which, to a strange, hollow, and confused noise, they*

*heavily vanish*" (IV.i.138.SD). These vanishing spirits prompt one of Shakespeare's most famous speeches, as Prospero draws out the analogy between this theatrical model of the world and the natural world in which we live, dream, and die:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air;  
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like the insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep. (IV.i.148–57)

Cavendish is generating a similar model of theatrical worldmaking in her own vanishing scene. Shakespeare has created the island as its own enclosed and metaphysically unified space, a model for the whole world, and then he crafts a theatrical world within that modeled space that reaches out to the scale of "the great globe itself" before vanishing. In Prospero's description of this world dissolving, Shakespeare collapses the distinctions among the theater in which Shakespeare's audience watches the play, the fictional island on which the play takes place, the pastoral world of the marriage masque, and the natural world in which we all live our lives.

If Shakespeare creates this dissolving of worlds in part by bringing a pastoral masque out to sea, on an exotic island, Cavendish reverses the procedure, staging an oceanic masque within the seemingly pastoral convent. After the scene of sheep grazing in a green has vanished, Lady Happy and the Princess briefly appear separately to reflect on their growing love for each other, followed by their immediate appearance inside a new spectacular performance space: "*The SCENE is opened, and there is presented a Rock as in the Sea; whereupon sits the Princess and the Lady HAPPY; the PRINCESS as the Sea-God NEPTUNE, the Lady HAPPY as a Sea-Goddess: the rest of the Ladies sit somewhat lower, drest*

*like Water-Nymphs*" (*Convent* 240). After the Princess and Happy give long speeches modeling an oceanic vision of the world, the scene again vanishes, now followed by the women coming out in apparel appropriate for a dance. This oceanic spectacle both is and is not in the same space as the pastoral that had vanished in the previous scene. In both cases, the two women are appearing in costume inside the convent's theater, layering the two models of nature on top of each other. But with the vanishing of the scenery, there is also a sense in which each of the models opens up and begins to merge with different parts of nature, at land and at sea.

Inside the oceanic scene, Cavendish again gives the two women long speeches that imagine planetary interconnections, but as she incorporates the ocean into her vision of nature as a unified whole, her planetary vision becomes increasingly dependent on an extractive form of global imperialism. Lady Happy imagines the planetary interaction of the ocean with the cosmos: "I feed the Sun... / Moist vapour from my brest I give, / Which he sucks forth, and makes him live" (*Convent* 240). Alongside this image of the ocean as tied up with cosmological processes, the Princess-as-Neptune imagines a global network in his service:

I Am the King of all the Seas,  
 All Watry Creatures do me please,  
 Obey my Power and Command,  
 And bring me Presents from the Land;  
 The Waters open their Flood-gates,  
 Where Ships do pass, sent by the Fates;  
 Which Fates do yearly, as *May-Dew*,  
 Send me a Tribute from *Peru*,  
 From other Nations besides,  
 Brought by their Servants, Winds and Tides,  
 Ships fraught and Men to me they bring. (*Convent* 240)

In this pairing of speeches, we can observe Cavendish attempting to link the two concepts of the global and the planetary that Chakrabarty has called to our attention. Lady Happy describes the globe as a planet whose life-sustaining capacities are tied to its interactions with the sun, while the Princess imagines the globe as an expansive space across which powerful states and individuals extract wealth.<sup>15</sup> If Chakrabarty has suggested that our



increasing awareness of global warming has made the distinction appear freshly relevant, Cavendish attempts to collapse the distinction for her own purposes. Writing at the moment when the globalized capitalist system was just beginning its consolidation, she presses its imperial vision into the service of her attempt to imagine the world whole.

## Conclusion

This closing turn to imperialism should remind us of the risks in too closely following Cavendish's celebration of her own capacity to craft a planetary subjectivity. To think about the catastrophic climate futures facing our planet it is not enough to see global warming as a singular phenomenon. We must also think about the highly unequal distribution of environmental harms. In her recent study of how postcolonial and world literatures respond to the current environmental crisis, Jennifer Wenzel urges us to "read for the planet," by which she means both "reading for images of the world entire: as a conceptual, social, or planetary whole" and "reading for traffic lines of power and modes of inequality that conjoin and divide those wholes" (2). Even as she focuses on contemporary literature, Wenzel reminds us that "the earth-spanning, globe-mapping, world-creating, lifeworld-destroying effects of European imperialism and the transatlantic slave trade" stretch back historically to the early modern period (4). Cavendish, as a member of the European aristocracy, would have been entangled in these processes, but her philosophical vision and fecund imagination also led her to oppose and critique models in which humanity could imagine itself as able to stand above and control nature. The models of the planetary whole that she generated, quite extraordinarily, treated humans as parts of nature, themselves made up of smaller parts of nature, in a teeming and infinitely various world.

## Endnotes

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participants in the *Another Humanism* conference in Stockholm for their stimulating and insightful conversation, as well as Heidi Craig, Boyda Johnstone, and Alexandra Verini for their attentive reading of earlier drafts.

2. I cite Spinoza from Oldenburg, *Correspondence*, which uses a different translation than does Chakrabarty.

3. I have previously published on how the concept of discovery supported this framing of experimental objects (Lash, "Discovering Discovery"). That previous essay briefly touches on the argument about Margaret Cavendish's alternative epistemological practices that I develop more fully here.

4. Historian of philosophy Eric Schliesser has suggested that "we could label this passage [...] as the Copernican revolution in Spinoza's thought" (165). For discussion of Spinoza's scientific thinking and how it developed in this encounter with the Royal Society, see also Harrop; and Peterman, "Spinoza on Physical Science."

5. There is no evidence that Spinoza and Cavendish were aware of each other's work, so the similarities would have been developed independently. The echoes between Spinoza and Cavendish were first noticed by James and developed further by Detlefsen.

6. The sophistication with which Cavendish works to see all the parts of nature unified into a single whole has been treated in Blake, "Grounds of Literature"; Georgescu; and Shaheen, "Part of Nature."

7. Suzuki argues that Cavendish links gendered subordination of women to the human subordination of nature, and shows a planetary perspective in some of Cavendish's early poems, where "Earth speaks *qua* Earth" (197); Hanlon sees Cavendish anticipating the Anthropocene concern with blurring "the distinctions between the human and inhuman, the natural and the constructed" (53); and Blake describes how Cavendish seeks "a form of life that exists after, or beyond, human life and agency" ("After Life" 437).

8. The terms of debate were set in Catherine Gallagher's classic article, "Embracing the Absolute," which argued that Cavendish's monarchical politics supported her self-definition as an absolutely self-possessed writer. More recently, see Prakas on the element of "intellectual coercion" in Cavendish's work (125), and Koester on

how Cavendish aims to “create her own cult, where her egotism and charm [...] serves as a unifying force” (214).

9. For Cavendish’s use of “singularity through apparel” to evoke her “aristocratic entitlement” (353), see Landers.

10. Shakespeare was an especially important influence for Cavendish. See the essays collected in Romack and Fitzmaurice. Lara Dodds has traced the complex web of English poets and playwrights, including Shakespeare, who influenced Cavendish.

11. For further discussions of the gender politics of the relationship between Lady Happy and the cross-dressed Princess, see Bonin; Traub 229–75; Kellett; Cole.

12. For ecocritical work on *As You Like It*, see Watson; Theis; and Nardizzi.

13. Tien-Yi Chao argues that this marriage allows Cavendish to stage her own version of the union of art and nature that early modern alchemy aimed to achieve.

14. I describe such theatrical framing in “Discovering Discovery.”

15. An alternate reading of the scene has been proposed by Tara Pedersen, who argues that Lady Happy’s appearance as a mermaid serves to undercut the masculine power that the Princess represents in the persona of Neptune.

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# 8. Know Thyself: Margaret Cavendish on Self-Motion, Self-Knowledge, and Self-Perception

Cecilia Rosengren

## Summary

The idea of the self-motion of nature was fundamental for the seventeenth-century natural philosopher and freethinker Margaret Cavendish. Throughout her writings she argued against the Cartesian dualism that implied that only human reason could move freely. According to Cavendish, the concept of nature included mechanical mobility as well as sensory perceptions and intellectual knowledge. Consequently, matter was constituted by these movements, albeit to different degrees. From a metaphysical perspective, the boundaries of human subjectivity were thus not clear. These were always set in relation to the constant activity of matter, perception and patterning. In this chapter I want to expound on these thoughts and illustrate how Cavendish's three central concepts—"self-motion," "self-perception," and "self-knowledge"—challenge the emergence of the autonomous and rational Cartesian human subject. In addition, I argue that there are interesting intellectual synergies between Cavendish's early modern natural philosophy and more recent new materialist and ecofeminist thought in terms of nonhuman agencies and the relationality of matter.

## Introduction

When with Returning-thoughts I do behold  
My self, I find all Creatures of the Mold:

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And for the *Mind*, which some say, is like Gods;  
 I do no find, 'twixt *Man* and *Beast*, such odds;  
 Only the Shape of Man is fit for use,  
 Which makes him seem much wiser than a *Goose*  
 [...]  
 And since all Knowledg, by your Form, you gain;  
 Then let not *Pride* above your *Reason* reign.  
 [...]  
 Nor boast of *Speech*, 'cause *Reason* it can show;  
 For *Beasts* have *Reason* too, for ought we know.  
 (Cavendish, "Of Humility," *Poems* 135–36)

In her book *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin with the Chthulucene* (2016) Donna Haraway explores ways to set us free from entrenched thinking in Western philosophy, science, and politics, since its "bounded individualism [...] has finally become unavailable to think with, truly no longer thinkable, technically or any other way" (5).<sup>1</sup> And, she continues, its persistent notion of human exceptionalism is far from being challenged by thinking represented by posthumanism and the Anthropocene, despite their critical profile. Certainly, posthumanism and the Anthropocene have brought about urgent insights and new perspectives regarding culture and nature, humans and other-than-humans, knowledge, and responsibility, but they are nonetheless attached to the idea of a human age (Anthropocene), and they tend to over-value human agency and the thinking subject as the foundation of knowledge. The devastating effects of the "great acceleration" of the post–World War II era in terms of capitalism, industrialization, and consumerism are, however, acute and threaten the future of the planet—global warming, extreme weather conditions, melting Arctic, multispecies extinction, chemical pollution, dying coral reefs...

### Un geste spéculatif

In this situation of onrushing disasters Haraway encourages us to cultivate better ways of thinking and to strengthen the capacity of "response-ability [...] *without* the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse" (35). Exemplifying with

everyday experiences, new research within earth and life sciences, and in line with thinkers such as anthropologist Anna Tsing, chemist and philosopher Isabelle Stengers, philosophers of science Vinciane Despret and Bruno Latour, Haraway traces the radical entanglements in nature, as well as the agency of both animals and plants. She evokes a world where human beings are unceasingly becoming-with all sorts of “companion species”—trees, dogs, pigeons, mushrooms, octopuses, intestinal bacteria, microbes, and so on.<sup>2</sup> This world—she calls it the Chthulucene—is thus fundamentally sympoietic, and not autopoietic, and we have to face that we are all like “lichens; so we can be scraped off the rocks by the Furies, who erupt to avenge crimes against the earth. Alternatively, we can join in the metabolic transformations between and among rocks and critters for living and dying well” (Haraway 56). To some, Haraway’s take on the world may sound overly fanciful. But it is a fact that the state of the art within parts of natural sciences (for instance microbiome studies) points to the same conclusion and to an inevitable practice of thinking-with nature. In “The Epistemic Revolution Induced by Microbiome Studies: An Interdisciplinary View” (2021) the 16 authors (such as soil evolution scientist Eric Bapteste, microbiologist Marc-André Selosse, microbial ecologist Catherine Larose, and evolutionary biologist Ford Doolittle), describe their work as an ongoing epistemic revolution, with the potential to fundamentally change how we understand the world through an ecologization of preexisting concepts. They state that:

[The] focus on systemic, multi-scalar interactions with microbes, and the adjunction of less familiar individuals into various fields contribute to a fifth strong trend induced by microbiome studies across all disciplines that care about microbiomes: a de-anthropocentrification of our perception of the world. Indeed, microbiome studies prompt us to realize that humans occupy less central or less prestigious positions in nature than we believed we did. (Bapteste 11)

So, *le geste spéculatif* (to use Isabelle Stengers’s phrasing) of Haraway might not be so speculative in the suppositional sense (Haraway 134).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Haraway advocates both speculative

fabulations and speculative realisms for better thinking and the material she uses is often provided by the genre of science fiction, where “the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come” is presented to us (31).<sup>4</sup>

Haraway’s worries from 2016 still have relevance today, and we cannot but stay with the trouble. However, the historical roots are perhaps less distinct in her argument. I am thinking of the philosophical and scientific debates in the seventeenth century, and the early stages of modern Western thought that according to Haraway has come to a dead end. The Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, and the human excellence with regard to knowledge of nature, is of course the case in point. Equally, the empirically induced knowledge of the scientists of the Royal Society is symptomatic of the idea of human superiority (Fudge 167–69). Nonetheless, the historical period of the Scientific Revolution also saw numerous thinkers who questioned the idea that the knowledge of nature was necessarily rooted in the individual thinking subject and therefore relative to its limits, and who doubted the mechanistic world view with its division between a free soul and machine-like matter, humans and the rest of the world. English natural philosopher Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673) was one of those voices, as seen in her poem above.<sup>5</sup> In the history of science and philosophy, her critical opinions were long forgotten. Her natural philosophy, if at all known, was considered way too speculative and incomprehensible. It aligned with neither the rationalists nor the empiricists, so it had no place to settle in the order of discourse. Furthermore, being an intellectual woman who published her thoughts in a time when this was highly inappropriate, she was generally considered an anomaly. But since the late twentieth century Cavendish’s writings have attracted a lot of interest in different scholarly fields—philosophy, history of science, literary studies, drama, cultural history, and so on.<sup>6</sup> This was of course something she could not foresee during her lifetime, but maybe she had a hunch that she wrote for the future. In the preface to *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) she comments that “if she [her philosophy] be slighted now and buried in silence, she may perhaps rise more gloriously here after;

for her ground being sense and reason, she may meet with an age where she will be more regarded, than she is in this" (12–13). And Cavendish's thinking certainly resonates with pressing issues of our times. Not least, her original understanding of nature matches new materialist and ecofeminist thought. In this chapter I want to call attention to the intellectual synergies between now and then, by focusing on Cavendish's elaboration on the concepts of "self-motion," "self-knowledge," and "self-perception."

The classical Delphic motto—*know thyself*—was a standard guiding principle in early modern English culture. It then generally referred to a self-knowledge exclusively meant for humans as good Christians (Fudge 26–31). In my reading of Cavendish, I will emphasize her alternative *know thyself* as an argument for self-knowledge prevailing in nature as a whole, but at the same time along with an "eco-awareness [that] never effaces the individual" (Gruber, *Eco-self* 39). To secure her metaphysics Cavendish needed a strong individual, philosopher Laura Georgescu has argued (Georgescu 623). By focusing on the metaphysical consequences of Cavendish's "doctrine of complete blending" in nature (that is, nature in all its variety is fundamentally constituted by three degrees—inanimate matter, sensitive matter, and rational matter), Georgescu convincingly brings out the internal logic between nature's interconnectedness by perception of parts and individual self-knowing in general. But what kind of human self is fostered in this world of nonhuman agencies and the relationality of matter? Here I am inspired by Elisabeth D. Gruber, who in her studies on the "eco-self" in early modern English literature claims that this specific identity, to which also Cavendish may be included, "emerges as a distinct phenomenon in early modern texts, and [that] it has the potential to offer refinements to contemporary ecological theory, especially that branch of it aimed at redefining humanness" ("Wrestling with the Eco-self" 232).

Cavendish published extensively—14 volumes between 1653 and 1668, including essays on natural philosophy as well as fictitious correspondences, a biography of her husband, plays, novellas, poems, and orations.<sup>7</sup> All through her career she had a philosophical interest, heeding controversial issues of her times. That is, she was engaged in developing a position within the

new anti-Aristotelian system of the world represented by Galileo Galilei, Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Pierre Gassendi, and other natural philosophers. Exploring different genres in this pursuit, she moved freely between fact and fiction. Still, as Lisa Sarasohn has pointed out in *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish. Reason and Fancy during the Scientific Revolution* (2010), there is “a basic structural similarity, in which reason and imagination function as dual expositors of her philosophy” (18). Indeed, the twin publication of one of her key philosophical treatise *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) with the speculative fictional story (SF *avant la lettre*) *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666) was in full accordance with her intentions. In *Blazing World*, Cavendish addresses the reader:

If you wonder, that I join a work of fancy to my serious philosophical contemplations; think not that it is out of a disparagement to philosophy [...] The end of reason, is truth; the end of fancy, is fiction; but mistake me not, when I distinguish *fancy* from reason; I mean not as if fancy were not made by the rational parts of matter; but by *reason* I understand a rational search and enquiry into the causes of natural effects; and by *fancy* a voluntary creation or production of the mind, both being effects, or rather actions of the rational parts of matter. (5–6)

With these thoughts in mind, thinking-with Haraway’s trust in the combination of speculative fabulations and speculative realisms, I will now expand on Cavendish’s alternative way of conceptualizing nature and knowledge in relation to the notion of “self.” I will mainly focus on her reasoning in *Observations*, but when applicable also bring in examples from her poetry as well as philosophical letters.<sup>8</sup>

## The Philosophical I and Human Knowledge

In the poem “Of Humility” Cavendish observes herself and she discovers an ecosystem of unclear hierarchies: “When with Returning-thoughts I do behold / My self, I find all Creatures of the Mold.”<sup>9</sup> For Descartes the same move, perhaps a more

dramatic fall in the whirlpool of doubts, resulted in the isolation of the self from the rest of the world, as stated in the second meditation on first philosophy in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641):

I know that I exist: I ask now who is this “I” whom I know? Most certainly, in the strict sense the knowledge of this “I” does not depend upon any of things whose existence I do not yet have knowledge. (65)

Whether Cavendish reacted to this precise passage is hard to know, but all through her writings she is critical toward the Cartesian subject and the world it deduced.<sup>10</sup> In *Philosophical Letters* (1664), where she engages in serious readings of the most famous philosophers of her age, among those Descartes (97), she articulates her point of view: “*That the Mind, according to your Authors [Descartes’s] opinion, is a Substance really distinct from the body, and may be actually separated from it and subsist without it [...]* I am far from his opinion” (111). Cavendish’s own opinions were conveyed with great integrity and with a strong philosophical “I”. She was convinced that the method she used, to follow “sense and reason,” was sufficient for knowledge production, because, she declares in *Observations*, “neither my sensitive, nor my rational faculties could enable me to perceive a more substantial ground” (21). It is interesting to notice how much she relied on her own thinking capacities, but Cavendish’s intellectual self-awareness was not unique in her time. It was linked with the emergence of “a new kind of *philosopher*—the philosophical ‘layman’” (Hutton 125), who was associated with intellectual pluralism and skepticism and who communicated through the printing press and the public sphere, and not necessarily to learned institutions (which anyhow excluded women). In this context Cavendish could define herself as a free thinker and not worry so much that her philosophy “being new” (she writes) might be difficult to grasp, because for those who follow her “sense and reason [...] that cloud of obscurity will soon vanish, and the light of knowledge appear in the room of it” (21).

Cavendish’s knowledge claims are rationally grounded according to “sense and reason,” but in line with her philosophy in

general these claims are inescapably relative and always situated. There is no “god-trick” when it comes to knowledge of nature, to use another term of Haraway’s, since we live in a world of natural, and not supernatural, phenomena.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, everything in the world is material, even reason is material. To explain the observed variety of figures and actions in nature, she postulates (as I mentioned above) that matter comes in three degrees—inanimate, rational, and sensitive (whereas the two latter are animate) and these degrees are “without any separation or division from each other; for, could matter be divided into an atom, that very atom would have a composition of these three degrees of matter” (221). So, a doctrine of complete blending. Anticipating objections about this leveling of every part in nature, and to allow reason even to stones, her argument in *Observations* continues:

I do not deny that a stone has reason, or doth partake of the rational soul of nature, as well as man doth, because it is part of the same matter man consists of; but yet it has not animal or human sense and reason, because it is not of animal kind; but being a mineral it has sense and reason; for it is to be observed, that as animate self-moving matter moves not one and the same way in all creatures, so there can neither be the same way of knowledge and understanding. (221)

Georgescu draws attention to the aspect that, for Cavendish, bodies are distinguished by “what they do to other bodies, and not what they are made up of” (“Self-Knowledge” 620). The human knowledge of nature is thus clearly linked to other knowledgeable creatures, but men are full of “self-love, and conceited pride,” Cavendish remarks (218–19). She gives two concrete examples to show when humans have survived by learning from animals—birds foreseeing stormy weather and seeking shelter, and Egyptian crocodiles protecting themselves from floodings of the Nile (218). The human exceptionalism and human unwillingness to listen to nature is often rendered in her poetry, for example “A Dialogue betwixt Man and Nature” (84–86), “A Dialogue between an Oak and a Man Cutting It Down” (96–102), “Of the Knowledge of Beasts” (151), and “Of Birds” (152) in *Poems*. Here the very short poem “Of Fishes” (152):

Who know but Fish, which in the Sea do live,  
 Can a good Reason of its Saltness give?  
 And how it Ebbs and Flows, perchance they can  
 Shew Reasons more than ever yet could Man.

Cavendish does not believe that human knowledge of the saltiness of water could ever be the same as the fish's knowledge, but her metaphysics cannot deny the fish their self-knowledge and the certainty that the self-motion of the fish in some way affects us. If only men would understand, she stresses, that "it is without dispute, that other creatures, in their kinds, are as knowing and wise, as man in his kind" (*Observations* 219). She cannot even see man as the obvious guardian of God's creation. Not surprisingly, in *The Blazing World*, the fantastical and fictional version of the natural philosophy of *Observations*, animals (or hybrid beast-men of different kinds—worms, bears, birds, etc.) accordingly act as teachers (Kottum 126–32).

### Self-Motion, Self-Knowledge, and Self-Perception

It is significant that Cavendish added the prefix "self" to her key concepts regarding motion, knowledge, and perception. According to *Oxford English Dictionary* she even coined the term "self-perception" in 1666, when it appeared for the first time in history in *Observations* (163). It is interesting too to note that adding the prefix "self" to words connoting personal awareness as well as capability turned up as novelties and in great quantities in the seventeenth century.<sup>12</sup> So, something with those "Returning-thoughts" Cavendish mentioned in her poem of humility was at stake during her lifetime. The frequency band, however, shows that the term was not very successful. It was rarely used before the twentieth century, though it nowadays is frequent in written English. The dictionary explains that it stands for "consciousness or awareness of oneself or one's existence; (now) *spec.* insight into one's nature or character; an instance of this," an explanation that reflects the subsequent changed meaning of the term of the years. Self-perception was in fact impossible in the opinion of Cavendish. Perception is always exterior, related to interconnection of parts.



As I have already put forward, Cavendish's natural philosophy is grounded in the idea that nature is a material self-moving and self-knowing body—"every part and article of nature, were it an atom, as it is self-moving, so it is also self-knowing and perceptive" (167). Self-motion, self-knowledge and perception are never-ending companions in a world of "a thorough mixture of animate (rational and sensitive) and inanimate matter, and so close and in separable a union and conjunction betwixt them, that it is impossible they should work differently, or not together" (150). There is no way to separate mind from matter. The material nature is also endlessly divisible and thus not built up by Cartesian corpuscles or Epicurean atoms. The baseline is instead a perpetual self-motion. Nature is bound to move, to divide and compose into particular figures, and to dissolve and change those figures in infinite ways since "self-motion is the cause of all particular effects, figures, actions, varieties, changes, lives, knowledges, perceptions, etc." (191). The self-motion goes in various directions and is not determined by mechanistic laws. Rather, nature's bodies are free to move as they please, though never beyond the limits of nature,

so that no part is tied or bound to one particular kind of perception [...] as the interior nature of that figure alters by the change of motion, the interior self-knowledge of that figure, alters too: for, if a vegetable should turn into a mineral, it cannot retain the self-knowledge of a vegetable, but it must of necessity change into the self-knowledge of a mineral; for nothing can have a knowledge of itself, otherwise than what it is. (166)

Nature's infinite divisions and compositions seem to guarantee that everything keeps in balance and does not turn into extremes (192). The perception of all parts of nature, which changes with the motion itself, orders and reorders the world from a particular perspective that implies a particular self-knowledge. Cavendish brings attention to this constant activity, which she calls "patterning," and she is certain the human perception takes this form (140, 169–83). But she allows for the possibility of a patterning capacity of all other creatures—animals, plants, and even stones and minerals. We are all in the same mold. She writes:

[B]y reason there is a perpetual commerce and intercourse between parts and parts [...] there must of necessity be perception between parts and parts [...] Therefore it is absurd to confine all perceptions of nature, either to pressure and reaction, or to the animal kind of perception; since even in one and the same animal sense, (as for example seeing) there are numerous perceptions: for, every motion of the eye, were it no more than a hairsbreadth, causes several perceptions: besides, it is not only the five organs in an animal, but every part and particle of his body, that has a peculiar knowledge and perception, because it consists of self-moving matter [and] a piece of wood, stone, or metal, may have a perceptive knowledge of man, yet it hath not a man's perception [...] no more than the eye patterning out a tree or stone, can be said to have a vegetable or mineral perception. (141)

The outlook might seem unsettling but, from a metaphysical perspective, this is what we have—regularities and stabilities formed by the “perpetual commerce and intercourse” of self-knowledgeable individuals in self-motion.

## Concluding Remarks

In the beginning of this chapter, I said that Cavendish's natural thinking resonates with pressing issues of our times, and that her understanding of nature matches new materialist and ecofeminist thought. Still, Cavendish was a child of her own time, as we all are. The worries she encountered during her lifetime were related to a very violent historical period entailing civil war, years in exile, and unsecure living circumstances (although she belonged to the upper-class of society) and these worries were touched upon in some of her writings, for instance *CCXI Sociable Letters* (1664) and *Orations of Divers Sorts, Accomodated for Divers Places* (1662). However, her concerns also included natural philosophy, changing conceptions of nature, and scientific procedures of knowledge production. She was not alone in her criticism toward the modern version of human exceptionalism that the new science represented. Gruber has convincingly pinpointed an “eco-self” in early modern English literature, which demonstrated the fluid relationships of nature's creatures and the human rootedness in the natural world,

hand in hand with a robust sense of the individual self. She exemplifies with writings of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Webster, and she also includes Cavendish's *The Blazing World*. I do agree with her that engaging with these voices, and other early modern alternative voices, may help us distinguish an updated human self-concept, in line with the epistemic revolution the microbiome scientists speak of.

Cavendish's natural philosophy challenges prevailing notions of human superiority and the objectification of the natural world by refusing to accept that knowledge about nature is derived from a privileged, anthropocentric, position. It is a radical critique of the Cartesian philosophical subject, the distinct separation between body and soul, senses from reason. In a beautiful passage she writes that "touch is like a thought in sense, and thought like a touch in reason [...] all self-knowledge is a kind of thoughtfulness" (*Observations* 82). Since self-knowledge and perception are the fundamental actions of matter, thought is active in all parts of nature. The human perspective is not necessarily the rule, and no part of nature can escape being perceived: "A man perceives the trunk he is leaning on to rest, but the trunk also perceives the man" (Rosengren 103). Every perception entails a new perspective, and therefore a new possibility for knowledge. This implies a certain amount of agency in every part of nature. A world becoming-with?

## Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise stated, all citations of Haraway's work are from *Staying with the Trouble*.
2. Haraway spells out the everyday experience of this becoming-with: "In human-animal worlds, companion species are ordinary beings-in-encounter in the house, lab, field, zoo, park, truck, office, prison, ranch, arena, village, human hospital, forest, slaughterhouse, estuary, vet clinic, lake, stadium, barn, wildlife preserve, farm, ocean canyon, city streets, factory, and more" (13). The idea of companion species is developed in her book *When Species Meet*.
3. Isabelle Stengers and Didier Debaise present the collection of essays *Gestes spéculatifs* as "speculative (and truly engaged) 'gestures', in the context of a widespread crisis of the modes of thinking of modernity."

4. Two of Haraway's favorite and most-often-referred-to SF authors are Ursula le Guin and Octavia E. Butler.

5. In *Vibrant Matter* Jane Bennett brings this alternative history in sight and she engages in the tradition of thinkers in history for whom "matter is figured as a vitality at work both inside and outside of selves, and is a force to be reckoned with without being purposive in any strong sense. [...] Epicurus, Lucretius, Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, Denis Diderot, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry David Thoreau, and others" (62). Margaret Cavendish is, however, not among her sources to think vibrant matter.

6. The research literature on Cavendish's works has become extensive. For this present study I have found the following texts valuable: Marcy Lascano's *The Metaphysics of Margaret Cavendish and Anne Conway*, Laura Georgescu's article "Self-Knowledge, Perception, and Margaret Cavendish's Metaphysics of the Individual," and Deborah Boyle's on "Margaret Cavendish on Perception, Self-Knowledge, and Probable Opinion."

7. Cavendish's works, all printed in London, no second editions included here: *Poems and Fancies* (1653), *Philosophicall Fancies* (1653), *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), *The World's Olio* (1655), *Nature's Pictures Drawn by Fancie's Pencil to Life* (1655/56), *Playes* (1662), *Orations of Divers sorts, Accomodated to Divers Places* (1662/63), *CCXI Sociable Letters* (1664), *Philosophical Letters: Or Modest Reflections Upon some Opinions in Natural Philosophy* (1664), *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy. To Which Is Added, The Description of a New Blazing World* (1666), *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High and Puissant Prince William Cavendishe* (1667), *Plays, Never Before Printed* (1668), and *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668).

8. The chapters referred to in *Observations* are mainly, but not only, from Part I: "XXXV Of Knowledge and Perception in General," "XXXVI Of Different Perceptions of Sense and Reason," "XXXVII Several Questions and Answers Concerning Knowledge and Perception," and Part II: "XIII Of the Knowledge of Man," "XV Of the Rational Soul of Man."

9. The poem is included in Cavendish's first publication *Poems and Fancies* (1653); the cited version is the slightly revised one published in 1668.

10. While in exile she had met Descartes in Paris in the 1640s at her husband William's and his brother Charles's social gatherings, but she did not really converse with him. She seriously started studying his philosophy when she returned to England in 1660 (Rees 35).

11. In "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," Haraway argues "for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. [...] the god-trick is forbidden" (195). Compare the statement in *Observations* that "the soul of man is part of the soul of nature, and the soul of nature is material: I mean only the natural soul, not the divine soul of man, which I leave to the Church" (221).

12. Such as "self-esteem" (1619), "self-determination" (1652), "self-consciousness" (1646), "self-control" (1653), "self-evident" (1643), "self-government" (1622), "self-expression" (1653) "self-discipline" (1612), and "self-deception" (1648). See "Self" in *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Entries?q=self-&sortOption=Frequency> [accessed February 25, 2024].

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# 9. Allegory, Knowledge, and the Spectacular Self in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

Jobst Welge

## Summary

In this chapter I aim to explore how the Mexican writer Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz projects a form of subjectivity and female voice that is disentangled from a fixed notion of (material) embodiment and instead aligns itself with nonhuman, cosmic, and natural signs and networks. Through readings of her works, specifically *Allegorical Neptune* (ca. 1680) and *First Dream* (1690), I will explore the tension between material-subjective embodiment and verbal-allegorical representation, reflecting on the power and gender constellations (including the role of the *criollo* subject) addressed by Sor Juana in several of her works. In the interstices of a back and forth between the sensible and the intelligible, we may recognize a speaking position, a subject, which does not come together as an organic subject but which breaks through the order of allegorical representation in order to point to its own contradictory situatedness.

## Introduction

In this chapter I want to revisit the poetic work of the Mexican writer Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (ca. 1648–1695), in light of the question of how it may represent a different—possibly non-Cartesian—idea of the early modern subject and humanist knowledge. Although Sor Juana is routinely celebrated as a feminist icon of early modern literature (Merrim, “Toward a Feminist Reading”), her writings, heavily determined by baroque conventions and circumstantial occasions of patronage, can hardly be said

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to express her subjectivity in any “direct” way. As Berit Callsen has argued (with reference to Foucault’s processual understanding of the “technology of the self”), in contrast to Descartes’s notion of the autonomous subject, Sor Juana’s desire of knowledge is circumscribed by a consciousness of its limitations as well as the processual nature of the act of knowing (100).

Yet how can we grasp the contours of this self in her writings? Is there a subject in these texts, in this poetry “devoid of intimacy” (González Echevarría 45)? To address these questions, I will first briefly look at Sor Juana’s well-known and more straightforwardly “autobiographical” text, the “Response of the Poet to Sor Filotea.” In the main part of the chapter, I will analyze traces of her discursive subject position in two poetic works where the expression of the self can be identified only in an indirect fashion: first, the text *Allegorical Neptune*, rarely discussed in this context, and, second, her famous and longest poem, *First Dream*.<sup>1</sup>

Sor Juana’s humanism needs to be contextualized with regard to the specific subject position she occupied as a cloistered nun and as belonging to the *criollo* population of New Spain. While still a girl, Sor Juana was brought to the viceregal court, where she served as a lady-in-waiting for some years. Later she became a Hieronymite nun, who authored compositions for civic and religious authorities. In this context, she worked within the context of cultural syncretism that had been fostered by the Jesuits and intellectuals like Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (Paz 56). This cultural atmosphere influenced the *criollo* notion of a New Spain, with a characteristically contradictory attitude that simultaneously exalted the Hispanic Empire, denigrated the Spaniards, and glorified the past of the *indios* (Paz 57)—often with a “vindictive tone” (Merrim, *Spectacular City* 17). This specific constellation and the necessity to lay the grounds for a cultural identity in a newly Christianized land explains the syncretistic reinterpretation and transplantation of humanism as a way to subsume the Aztec heritage in an imperial framework (Paz 58). As Octavio Paz writes in his classic study *Sor Juana, or the Traps of Faith* (Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o Las trampas de la fe, 1982), “Mexico-Tenochtitlan was an American Rome; [...]. In the image of the imperial city of Mexico, both Creole patriotism and the Jesuit dream

of a Christian universalism that would embrace all societies and cultures could be contemplated" (Paz 58). The literary and humanist activities of New Spain were essentially a male affair, so that the only spaces where learned women could participate were the court and the church. It is in these circumscribed spaces where Sor Juana was able to engage in the cultural self-assertion of the *criollo* elite, working within the confines allotted to a female subject.

In fact, as a female writer widely celebrated during her lifetime (and then largely forgotten since the mid-eighteenth century), Sor Juana's rhetoric is characteristically distinguished by the tension of religious humility, the deferral to official authority, and intellectual daring. Partly from her own account, we know that she failed to enter the University of Mexico despite dressing up as a boy (Cruz, *Selected Works* 96), and that she deliberately rejected the option of marriage and decided to enter the convent of San Jerónimo in 1669 (Hart 100). In her "Response to Sor Filotea"—"sister Filotea" being a female pseudonym for the bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, who had reproached her for her undue intellectual and literary activities, urging her to turn to spiritual matters—Sor Juana seeks to justify her striving for knowledge as a natural inclination, true to the learned activities of St. Jerome himself, church father and translator of the Bible.

Arguing that St. Jerome, were he alive today, would surely favor the education of women (Cruz, *Selected Works* 114–15), she explicitly renounces any *public* display of knowledge, as unbecoming for a woman: "I do not study to write, much less to teach (which would be excessive pride in me), but only to see whether by studying I will be less ignorant" (Cruz, *Selected Works* 95).<sup>2</sup> Similar to the strategies employed by Santa Teresa in her *Vida*, Sor Juana also adopts conventional elements from the genre of the female spiritual autobiography, such as the trope of holy ignorance, both conforming to and diverging from established authorities and (gender) hierarchies, and thus carving out a space for her self-defense as an intellectually active woman in light of the official norms of the colony (Myers; Tylus 54–79). For instance, diverging from the model, she emphasizes her secular education as a way of approaching gradually "the summit of sacred theology"

(Cruz, *Selected Works* 98) and her taking the veil as a means to pursue learning, and she lists *exempla* of women of letters, such as Santa Teresa or Birgitta (Cruz, *Selected Works* 104, 118).

In the following, then, I will discuss how this conflictual and tentative articulation of her intellectual, female self finds expression through, and in spite of, techniques of allegorical representation. Allegorical representation, often tied to hieroglyphic writing or dream visions, is surely, and especially in the baroque, a “hierarchizing mode, indicative of timeless order” (Fineman 8). As we will see, the verbal images and analogies of Sor Juana’s literature evoke, and hence embody, objects or entities (including her own position), but simultaneously also withdraw from this embodiment.<sup>3</sup>

### Spectacle and Authorship: *The Allegorical Neptune*

Sor Juana’s *Allegorical Neptune* is an unlikely place to look for a representation of the self, although some recent scholarship has begun to explore its subjective and feminist subtexts.<sup>4</sup> This work is a verbal description, an *ekphrasis*, of the ephemeral triumphal arch that was constructed out of wood, plaster, and paper, on the occasion of the entry of the viceroys, the Count and Countess of Paredes, Tomás Antonio de la Cerda, third Marquess de la Laguna, and his wife, María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, Countess de Paredes, into Mexico City in 1680.<sup>5</sup> As part of the extremely elaborate and highly expensive *entrada*, the arch was erected on the (not yet completed) cathedral’s western portal and was part of an outstanding urban spectacle designed to consolidate order and to work as a sort of architectural equivalent to the textual genre “mirror of princes” (Curcio-Nagy 353). This work, written when she had already a certain literary reputation, embodies, more than any other work, Sor Juana’s relation to hegemonic culture (Bokser 146). The text, according to Stephanie Merrim, “embodies the pressures and literary tactics that would radiate into her subsequent writing life” (*Spectacular City* 182).

Most obviously, Sor Juana’s ekphrastic and emblematic text, with different parts written in prose as well as verse, and published shortly after the triumphal event (1680 in Mexico, then in the collection *Castalian Inundation*, 1689, in Spain), is

the representation of something that is today absent—it is the figure of an original event, a representation of another representation (Johnson 4): This relation between the erected triumphal arch and its textual representation (its program, its remnant) is articulated in the text itself, namely in the short concluding poem, the versified “Explication of the Arch,” which was read aloud at the event itself:

*This, Lord, triumphant arch,  
that artfully composed  
more the study of love  
than the love of study;  
this, that as a gift to you  
gloriously introduced  
to be near to Heaven  
the affection and the discourse. (Cruz, *Neptuno  
alegórico* 189, emphasis added)*

While the deictic “this” (*este*) at the beginning of the poem modestly downplays the author’s erudition, the second deictic reference plays on the identity between the erected arch and the written text while also turning it into the grammatical subject of representation, thereby simultaneously highlighting and downplaying the authorial position of Sor Juana (Stabile 42). The next quatrain continues this apparent bracketing of her own authorship, and it qualifies the arch as a “Cicero without tongue,” a “silent Demosthenes, / that with colored voice proclaims to us your triumphs” (Cruz *Neptuno alegórico* 190). Furthermore, the imposing height of the arch—“this explorer of the air”; “this watchtower of heaven” (190)—associates the arch with traditional images of visual control as well as daring images that pay tribute to the power of the viceroys, yet which also reflect back on the author and her text, as the sole remaining document of the spectacular event. The arch, born of the author’s “fantasy,” is thus associated with the imagery of transgression, as embodied by the mythological figures of Icarus, Phaeton, and Prometheus, as Sor Juana writes in the “Explication”:

[T]his Prometheus of canvases  
and Daedalus of drawings,  
who with impunity usurps the rays,

who furrows the winds surely. (lines 37–40; Cruz,  
*Neptuno alegórico* 188)

In her preface to the text, Sor Juana explicates that the ancient Egyptians referred to the invisible deity with the help of hieroglyphic signs, thus invoking another method of mediation, a perhaps imperfect yet necessary means of making the invisible visible (Cruz, *Neptuno alegórico* 65), a method familiar both to Neoplatonism and Christianity. This logic of allegorical, indirect representation (“figuras,” “metáforas”; Cruz *Neptuno alegórico* 76) is doubled, as it were, since in her text Sor Juana describes the eight allegorical paintings and six emblems that would have been seen on the sides of the arch—but which now are absent and have to be reimagined by the reader. Sor Juana herself highlights that her work can only adumbrate a “most perfect original,” and appeals to the “imagination, in whose immense capacity the glories of such a heroic prince are still narrowed” (Cruz, *Neptuno alegórico* 76). The principle of analogy ensures that the virtuous king is celebrated in his capacity to be in turn a sign of a universal order of harmony. Yet again, the virtues pointed to by the text and its elaborate verbal signs revert to the signs themselves. The verbal simulacrum that makes present what is invisible, the universal power of empire (which in turn refers the colony to the Spanish Crown), achieves thus its own authority in the perception of the public (Grossi, “De la fiesta pública” 667–68).

The central conceit of the text is the idea that the Greek water god Neptune serves as an allegory for the viceroy, conveniently referring to the word “Lake” (“Laguna”) contained in his name. By figuring the viceroy as the sea god through the allegorical-emblematic apparatus of the arch, Sor Juana demonstrates her “humanist” competence, her ability to adapt the European mythographic sources to the circumstances of New Spain. Relying for her mythographic analogy on Cartari’s *Imagines deorum*, Conti’s *Mythologiae*, and Baltasar de Vitoria’s *Teatro de los dioses de la gentilidad*, among other texts, she has chosen a figure that is remarkable for its ability to cross cultural boundaries (Johnson 88). In fact, the engraving of Neptune and his wife Amphitrite in the illustrated edition of Cartari (1571) was later supplemented by the antiquarian Lorenzo Pignoria, who maintained that the

ancient Egyptians had once conquered the Mexicans, thus suggesting analogies between their respective deities (Johnson 90). Such mythographic fantasies prepared the ground for a strategy of cultural syncretism that Sor Juana – and Sigüenza y Góngora – were eager to develop for their *criollo* versions of transatlantic humanism (Fernández 26–30). Moreover, Neptune’s marriage to the initially resistant Amphitrite, mentioned in the description of the seventh painting (Cruz, *Neptuno alegórico* 124), is customarily linked to what Sor Juana calls her own “antipathy [...] toward matrimony” (“Response,” *Selected Works*, 97).

Mediating between the population and the power of the king, Sor Juana’s encomiastic *Allegorical Neptune* has also a somewhat more concrete agenda, namely to alert the king to the natural disaster of inundation that is threatening Mexico City, thus ingeniously linking the allegorical conceit to pragmatic tasks stipulated by the official commission (Arenal 23), namely to ask the American Neptune to protect the city against floods (Cruz, *Neptuno alegórico* 126). During this time the city, often compared to Venice, was still surrounded by swamps and lakes, and earlier attempts at drainage have been only partly successful (Jackson-Schebetta).

In the preface, this intercession is predicated on a stance of modesty and professed insufficiency: such a “high topic” would not be appropriate for her, yet still she has been elected as a “meagre instrument,” precisely because of her feminine marginality with respect to the official system of humanist learning: “[T]he uneducated softness of a woman is more apt than the eloquence of so many learned pens” (Cruz, *Neptuno alegórico* 73–74). Furthermore, she aligns her own speaking position with the biblical example of the woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14), who evades the ire of the king by virtue of being “an unknown woman, ignorant and poor,” and thus as a “thin subject” (*Neptuno alegórico* 74). For the most part, the ekphrastic text feels like a compilation of classical authorities (Statius, Lactantius, Ovid, Horace, etc.), so that the authorial voice of the writer becomes literally submerged by all these textual references. While Sor Juana’s authorial position is therefore indeed very “thin,” it goes to show that this is a way in which a cloistered woman could participate in the

discourse of official culture, by having her own voice framed and mediated by the authority of men—comparable to the literary strategies adopted by Teresa de Avila (Bokser 153; Tylus 54–79). As Merrim puts it, Sor Juana is “a ventriloquist whose voice is to a significant degree configured by other voices, other texts” (“Toward a Feminist Reading” 259).

Most conspicuously, the “Argument” describing the seventh painting recounts the contest between Neptune and Minerva over the naming of Athens, the city that embodies wisdom. Arguing for a mythological genealogy that makes Minerva, representing the triumph of reason, the daughter of Neptune (rather than of Jupiter), and hence making her indebted to him, Sor Juana has Neptune recognize the superior wisdom of Minerva, thus implicitly referring to the ideal relation between the viceroy and the female author: “[T]o say that Neptune begot Minerva was to say that he was wise and as such produced acts of wisdom; and to say that he was vanquished by her, was no more than to say that he was subject to the rules of reason, which is true freedom” (Cruz, *Neptuno alegórico* 159).

This somewhat fanciful relationship between Neptune and his daughter Minerva unsettles a hierarchy between male and female and forges a representational alliance between male rule and female wisdom. In the *Allegorical Neptune*, moreover, the figure of Neptune, being linked to Harpocrates (84), is also said to be the god of silence and the “master of sciences,” in his capacity as the son of the Egyptian goddess Isis (who partly overlaps with Minerva). Sor Juana has modeled Isis as a truly syncretistic figure, as the “Great Mother,” a poet, the “inventor of Egyptian writing,” embodying simultaneously a host of female goddesses, such as Venus, Diana, Ceres, Persephone, Juno, the moon (Cruz, *Neptuno alegórico* 78)—in short, Isis becomes a supreme mythological model for the textual artifact of the arch and the author herself, who variously associated herself with silence (Merrim, *The Spectacular City* 183). For this idea of Minerva/Isis as a figure of female wisdom, Sor Juana was likely influenced by the allegorical panegyric of the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher for Queen Christina of Sweden, when she arrived in Rome in 1655 and was presented as the “new Isis” (Findlen 351).<sup>6</sup>

If Sor Juana has rhetorically downplayed her authorial role and simultaneously inscribed her female positionality within the description of the arch, let us now see how the *First Dream* stages a more dramatic tension between ambition and humility, presence and absence of the self.

### The Self as Spectacle: *The First Dream*

The *First Dream* (1692) was written roughly 10 years after the *Allegorical Neptune*. According to Sor Juana herself, this 950-line poem was exceptional in that it was not the result of an official commission but that of her own initiative. As she writes in the *Response*, “I do not recall having written for my own pleasure except for a trifle they call *The Dream*” (Cruz, *Selected Works*, 121). This most famous poem of Sor Juana begins with a night scene and the body falling asleep, followed by a dream of the soul, until the moment of awakening in the last line of the poem. It is a poem that dramatizes the movement of ascent and descent, oscillating between the striving for knowledge and the curtailment of this desire. From the beginning of *The Dream*, this striving is not played out in individual terms but in the form of cosmic analogies, of images-as-likeness, as when the earth’s shadow strives—in vain—to reach the stars (lines 1–18):

Pyramidal, funereal, a shadow  
born of earth, aspiring to highest heaven,  
the haughty tip of its great obelisks  
striving in vain to climb up to the stars,  
and yet their resplendent light  
(sparkling always, always unassailable)  
from their great height scoffed at and  
mocked the gloom of the war  
waged on them with black vapors  
by fearsome, ephemeral  
shadows. (Cruz, *Selected Works* 45, lines 1–14)

While the soul thus reaches toward a vision of the high, the sleeping body is described in great physiological detail, yet from an objectifying perspective that draws on Aristotelian and scholastic models (Cruz, *Selected Works* 49–50). In the initial description of



the dream the poet describes a scene in which the interior faculties of the soul perceive a cosmic vision, proposing an extended simile that invokes the faculty of fantasy as straddling the *sensible* and the *intelligible*, as producing images based on previous, empirical sense perceptions:

[S]o did serene fantasy  
 copy images of all things, the unseen  
 brush shaping, without light, bright mental colors,  
 the figures not only of all sublunar  
 creatures but also of those  
 clear hues that are intellectual stars  
 and in the manner that the invisible  
 can be conceived. (Cruz, *Selected Works* 51–52;  
 lines 252–59)

At several points, yet relatively late in this long poem, the speaker uses a first-person pronoun or indicates an authorial voice (“I say”; “my understanding”; Cruz, *Selected Works* 52, line 295; 58, line 529). Between this linguistic marker of the self and the discourse about the ascent of the soul (“alma”; the noun is female in Spanish) the poem projects a discursive space that represents the “self” as both the subject and the object of poetic representation, the speaking voice and the sleeping being, as if they were two different entities (González Echevarría 238). This is a far cry from the notion of poetic self-expression prevalent in the predominant line of lyrical subjectivity. The poem does not at all talk about an interior, “psychological” state of the self but rather, following scholastic anatomy and the scientific language of the time (the “faculties”), it describes the bodily interior of the self in quasimedical terms. Further, the “intellective faculty” is mentioned, yet in an objectifying fashion, as is customary for the Counter-Reformation adaptation of scholastic thought: “as the understanding, here / vanquished as much by the immense multitude / (the weighty apparatus / of so many species comprised in a sphere) / [...] and looking at everything, nothing it saw” (Cruz, *Selected Works* 56; lines 409–18).

How can we understand the relation between embodied self and the ambition of intellectual understanding as well as Sor Juana’s self-understanding as a woman vis-à-vis humanist knowledge? Let

us look at how the poet uses and adapts specific images from the mythological and emblematic tradition. The poem's beginning, during the falling of night, features a series of mythological figures that might be read as images of transgression, such as the owl Nictimene, who drinks the sacred oil from the lamp of Minerva, a transgressive incursion into a luminous temple, an enclosed space that is coded as female, opposed to the potentially deceiving, optical, or sensual apprehension of the exterior world: "to reach, in sacrilege, the / bright sacred lamps of the eternal flame" (Cruz, *Selected Works* 46, lines 29–30).

The ascended soul in search of knowledge contemplates the universe from an elevated position higher than the pyramids of Memphis and the Tower of Babel (line 311). The association of Egyptian pyramids with wisdom was traditional in Hermetic thought and, in Sor Juana's mind, it was probably also linked with the antiquity of Mesoamerican civilization, now absent and only surviving in its monuments (Laukamp 130; González Echevarría 240). It is precisely to such striving—and the ambivalences involved—that the image of the pyramid also appeals. The shape of the pyramid is introduced into the poem as an ethereal form, qualifying the upward movement as an "ambitious flame," and thus representing the human soul and its aspirations. Yet this lofty ambition is paired with the pyramid's association not just with arcane knowledge but also with pagan barbarity (Laukamp 159): "barbarous hieroglyphs of blind error" (Cruz, *Selected Works* 54, lines 337–38). Occurring toward the beginning of the poem, the "ostentations" (line 340) of the pyramids anticipate the theme of intellectual failure and propose a possible analogy between their "profanity" and the profanity of the searching soul, as performed by the text. While these are conventional topoi (pyramids appear in a similar way in Góngora's *Soledades*),<sup>7</sup> there is also a specific relation to the authorial persona of Sor Juana. For in the 1690 letter that prompted her *Response*, the bishop of Puebla has associated her with ancient Egypt, precisely in a context where she has been chided for her secular learning by religious authorities:

Your Grace has spent a good deal of time studying philosophers and poets; now is the proper moment for you to perfect your pursuits and improve the books you read. Was there ever a nation

more erudite than Egypt? The first letters in the world originated there, and their hieroglyphics were a cause for astonishment. [...] And yet the Holy Spirit states openly that the Egyptian nation is barbaric, [...] And knowledge that does not light the way to salvation is deemed foolishness by God, Who knows all things. (*Selected Works* 88)

As many scholars have pointed out (and as we have already seen with the allegorical arch), Sor Juana's association with Egyptian lore was most visible in her fascination with the works of Athanasius Kircher, who was a central part of her autodidactic humanist education, as she discusses in her *Response*: "to read and read more, to study and study more, with no other teacher but the books themselves" (Cruz, *Selected Works* 97; 101). Yet it is precisely the Augustinian sin of *curiositas* that the bishop accuses Sor Juana of, by linking her with the knowledge of the ancient Egyptians (Brooke 5).

In addition to the "monumental" signs of pyramids and the Tower of Babel, which recall the tension between materiality and immateriality we observed in *Allegorical Neptune*, the poem features repeated images of flight. Thus, the notion of the "flight of the intellect" (line 268) and the poem's references to the "foolish experiment" and fall of Icarus (line 406) and to the "proud charioteer" Phaeton (line 669) point toward the presumptuousness of human knowledge. In fact, in early modern culture, the numerous poetical and emblematic reworkings of the myths of Phaeton and Icarus are ambivalently poised between moral condemnation of *curiositas* and exaltation of the human striving for knowledge (Cullhed; Ginzburg).<sup>8</sup> Sor Juana was clearly familiar with this visual tradition, which has in turn conditioned her poetic imagination. Moreover, in her *Response* Sor Juana had also addressed the phenomenon of intellectual curiosity, and in another poem (Ballad 2), speaking about excessive erudition as "mad ambition," she also alludes to the myth of Phaeton's fall as a sign of overreaching (*Selected Works* 7–8).

The very last line of the poem, as has frequently been remarked, is noticeable for revealing the position of the speaker as grammatically distinguished (in the Spanish original) as a female self: "[W]ith just light and distributive / order, gave all things visible

their colors, / restoring to the external senses their / function, the world illuminated with more / certain light, and I, awake" (Cruz, *Selected Works* 66, lines 969–75). However, this female voice suddenly becoming awake at the very end of the poem is different from the lyrical voice we are hearing throughout the poem—and which was utterly lacking in specificity. The final lines of the poem introduce, almost as an afterthought, the presence of a *female* speaker, a (re)entry into the world.

Although the previous flight of the intellect and its attempt to apprehend the universe ultimately amounts to a failure, it cannot simply be discarded—just as the “high impulse” (line 670) of Phaeton is not simply condemned. The previous display of knowledge is nevertheless a testimony to a search for the truth, expressing in philosophical terms precisely an (anti-Cartesian) awareness of the limits of rational apprehension of the world, the “preliminary nature of all knowledge” (Callsen 106, 112). As mentioned above, the poem represents the contemplating soul itself from a distance; it “freely cast the keen gaze / of her beautiful eyes of intellect, no / spyglass before them” (Cruz, *Selected Works* 55; lines 385–87). Sor Juana thus presents—to a certain extent—a countermodel to the Cartesian optical pyramid in which the light reflected by exterior objects converges on the retina—and hence constitutes a point of contact between the interior of the human subject and the objects of the outside world (Bergmann 142–43). During the nightly dream, the vision is of the imagination. The awakening at the end of the poem signals the failure of the epistemological quest, yet the restitution of colors to worldly objects brings to the fore the “external senses” and a voice that is—finally—embodied. Thus, the poem articulates a tension between vision as knowledge and deception, abstracting disembodiment and female embodiment, ambition and failure.

As González Echevarría has remarked, Sor Juana’s poetry depicts interiority only insofar as it is external to herself: “All intimacy turns into discourse, exhibition, theatre” (246). Moreover, the peculiar mode of allegorical as well as neoscholastic representation encountered in both works discussed here is generally characteristic for the (colonial) baroque; it does not favor the representation of interior subjectivity, yet it mobilizes

*fantasy*, a category of Aristotelian psychology, to mediate between the interior and the exterior:

This neoscholastic and non-Cartesian regime does not subordinate representation to a sufficient reason, as in the *cogito*, but to the *phantasmas* or images of phantasy. In contrast to Cartesianism, it does not differentiate *idea* from *image*, as an *intelligible* concept and a *sensible* image, but it defines the image as a visual formula of the idea that is intelligible and sensible at the same time. (Hansen 30–31)

Sor Juana's writings exhibit this typically baroque back and forth between the sensible and the intelligible, abstraction and embodiment: The self is inscribed in spectacle, the self becomes a spectacle unto itself. Yet at the same time we can detect a specific speaking position, not an organic subject but the adumbration of an authorial persona, a situated, gendered self that occasionally breaks through the order of allegorical representation in order to point to the authorial liberties and limitations of an extraordinary, unlikely humanist.

## Endnotes

1. The Spanish original of the *Response* (and also of the *First Dream*) is easily available in Cruz, *Ecos de mi pluma*. All English quotations from the *Response* and the *First Dream* refer to Edith Grossmann's translation in Cruz, *Selected Works*. All other translations are my own.

2. St. Jerome was a fitting model for Sor Juana, since "Jerome, too had come under attack by the Catholic Church for his intellectual endeavors" and "his guilty love of classical literature." See Villaseñor Black, 222. The article argues that the well-known portrait of Sor Juana by Miguel Cabrerías (1750) shows her (in contrast to other paintings of the eighteenth century) in the act of reading rather than writing—a way to emphasize, analogously to the *Response*, that she is "both learned and pious."

3. On representation as the semantic oscillation between substitution and mimetic evocation, between absence and making present, see the classic essay by Chartier.

4. For an excellent overview of the work's reception and recent interpretation, see Grossi, "Writing for the Public Eye." I have also much benefited from the recent study by Stabile.
5. Ephemeral "Roman" triumphal arches were previously used in Europe for the entries of popes and emperors, such as Charles V. (see Settis); there were also precedents of literary "triumphs," such as Petrarch's allegorical poem *Triumphs* (1351–74). Sor Juana's arch was displayed in conjunction with another arch conceived by her friend, the Mexican polymath Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (Arenal 26–28).
6. A visual image of Isis is also reproduced in Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* from 1655 (see Findlen 351). Queen Christina is also mentioned in Sor Juana's catalog of female paragons of learning in her *Response* (Cruz, *Selected Works* 112).
7. The poem of the *First Dream*, the epigraph declares, is "composed [...] in imitation of Góngora" (Cruz, *Selected Works* 45).
8. Cullhed reads them as referring to, at least sometimes, "a proud self-consciousness, perhaps even a modern subjectivity long before the modern subject" (160; my translation). Moreover, in light of female writers of the early modern period, he sees them as a possible "object of identification for female poets" (177), for their "incursion into literary culture," also making reference to Sor Juana (178).

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# 10. Who Reigns in the Garden of Creation? Female Authority in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

Alejandra Acosta Mota

## Summary

This chapter studies a short drama piece written by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (ca. 1648–1695) and dedicated to her protector, New Spain vicereine María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga. It focuses on the allegorical intricacies of the play to establish how its literary devices and artistic form, through characters, space, and events, convey meanings with moral and political significance regarding authority in a time when female patronage was rare and women were renegotiating their place in the world of cultural production.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The *Loa en las huertas donde fue a divertirse la excelentísima señora condesa de Paredes* (Loa in the Orchards Where the Most Excellent Lady Countess of Paredes Went) is a palatine play composed by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in (1681) to celebrate the arrival in 1680 of the new viceroy and vicereine, the Marquises of La Laguna, to New Spain. It is a short, independent theatrical piece,<sup>2</sup> which particularly praises María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga (1649–1729), who also held the nobility title of Countess of Paredes and who, during her rulership, would become the writer's main patroness, and would continue to be

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even after her mandate as vicereine ended and she came back to Spain's mainland.

The play begins with the confrontation of Zephyr and Vertumnus, the lovers of Flora and Pomona, who fight to crown their respective beloveds as the one true queen of the "pleasant republic" where flowers sing and mythological creatures live (Cruz 266).<sup>3</sup> The reasons given by both are essentially the same: Their beloved is the most beautiful, for which reason she should reign (Cruz 266–68). The debate, however, can only be resolved with the appearance on stage of a nymph, who, advised by Apollo, decides that the one who should be crowned is the Countess of Paredes, true sovereign of the place and queen honored by the play (Cruz 273–78). The garden where the action develops is a delight for the senses, infused with beauty, perfumes, music, and, of course, poetry.

As a palatine loa, the play at hand is framed by the particular sociopolitical context of the Spanish Empire courts. Like in other European courts, theatrics, appearance, and artistry served as instruments through which something as abstract as power and authority could be effectively represented. Actual or imagined presence, concealment or absence of rulers, both in the palace and outside of it, were loaded with meanings not devoid of gender representativeness and always related to hierarchy, prestige, and power. The artists and writers bringing to life this intricate system of symbolic rulership also benefited from it by gaining social status and protection.

Taking into account this context of courtly rituals, the studies at hand about Sor Juana's loa have pinpointed general characteristics of its text that could also be applied to her set of palatine loas or even her works as a whole: Political power representation supposes a dynamic between fiction and reality; the author's self-representations demonstrate wit and rhetoric mastery; and poetic images are inscribed in a complex system of metaphors that refer to a hierarchy and to morals attributed to ideal rulers, which can also be found in other types of representations like hieroglyphs, emblems, ephemeral monuments, and official portraits (Cortijo Ocaña 113–16; Farré Vidal 51–66; Poot-Herrera 249–54; Rivera 129–39).

However, classical mythology is an essential source for the critical interpretation of the play, as it also is for other works written by Sor Juana, like many of her poems, the *Allegorical Neptune* (ca. 1680) or plays *Loa to Divine Narcissus* (1689), which are widely populated with mythological figures of Greek and Roman origin. Such approach to *Loa in the Orchards* would considerably further its knowledge, especially with regard to two of its most notable, individual features yet to be studied from this perspective: Fiction, which focuses almost exclusively on female characters, was specifically aimed to an also female audience, and the space which is metatheatrical, superimposing an imagined garden to the real orchards where noblewomen spent leisure time.<sup>4</sup>

In the following I will examine the allegorical intricacies of the play to establish how, drawing from classical mythology, its characters, space, and events bear moral and political significance about female authority, and hence subjectivity. Because the text involves the legitimization of its author as literary creator for the court, but also of the praised noble woman as ruler, I will discuss such authority taking into account both those aspects of the literary work.

## The Garden: A Place for the Senses and the Intellect

European fascination with gardens as stages dates back to medieval times. Even then gardens had hydraulically driven automata that could produce many special theatrical effects. These beautiful spaces were also, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, where the humanist academies would often meet to perform poetry. Later on, their cultural significance gained complexity since the seventeenth century saw them as key frames of an array of human activities in terms of performativity and spectacle. Nature became part of an immersive experience and the garden as a whole was understood as part of the representational space, suggesting to its visitors a way of passage into the enchanted realm of pleasure. This idea had, as was to be expected, great appeal to members of the court spending time in gardens (Grant 178–82).

Beyond small gatherings, wider public celebrations and the garden became entwined in Renaissance culture as an extension of

the leisure activities that were carried out by court circles and deployed in the patios, squares, and orchards of villas and palaces. Festivities and gardens shared sources of inspiration and aesthetic objectives, given that both were configured as artistic expressions and instruments of representation that could serve political propaganda. As a courtly and symbolic space, the garden held celebratory events, whether in the houses of the nobility, through the use of natural space as an improvised festive framework, or even in the city streets, through the more or less artificial integration of nature in urban spaces (Gómez López 199–210).

Nonetheless, there would be no existence of the garden as a place without its intellectual conception as a rhetorical and mnemonic device that connected sense and intellect for cultivating virtue and godliness. This fundamental meaning derived from its historic significance in both the Judeo-Christian and Platonic traditions. During the early modern period the garden was, on the one hand, a place for salvation, like the Garden of Eden was, and on the other of scholarship, as conceived by the Platonic Academy. Aurora Egido follows the origins of this syncretism up to the Middle Ages, when the garden was introduced as a metaphor for paradise but, at the same time, as a natural and artificial space that became a representation of poetic creation (24–26). Because paradise was authored (cultivated) by God, the divine horticulturist, a sublimated image of the poet as divine gardener also represented those who with their work cultivated language and sought to create their own poetic universe. Dante has already spoken in the *Divine Comedy* of God as an “eternal horticulturist” and this image of the artistic creator of the garden would continue to proliferate in the works of Spanish poets like Góngora, Lope de Vega, and Pedro Soto de Rojas (Egido 26).

From theological and poetic traditions to architecture and performative arts, “the garden represents total harmony, combines music with poetry and turns topiary art into an emblem of proportion and number that reflects the order and perfection existing in nature” (Egido 29). But mythological narratives also participated in the symbiotic cultural transfers between intellectual and architectural designs of the garden. Classical gardens were decorated with statues of Venus, the Graces, the Seasons, Silvanus, Flora,

Pomona, Vertumnus, and other divinities, reflecting the Roman taste for statutes and obelisks. Around Europe they were also greatly influenced by the book *The Dream of Poliphilus*, published in 1499 (Egido 27–30).

When theatrics of public festivities came to be integrated into the garden as a representational space, these celebrations were the breeding ground for fictions inspired by mythology that functioned as allegories or metaphors related to the monarchy and the state, bringing what could have been Renaissance sculptures into life, making them prance around, act, and sing in the frame of a nature divinized by the intellect and designed to honor Italian and Spanish rulers (Gómez López 204; Grant 175–78).

Sor Juana's *Loa in the Orchards* clearly follows this long tradition of the garden as space for the representation of divine authority, political power, and poetic creation. Despite being short, her piece comprises all three levels of significance. She takes the dramatic action to the traditional space of courtly gardens, using cultivated nature as a ready-made, fully decorated theater, while also nodding to grandiose celebrations of the entrances of rulers in European and New Spain cities without having to resort to a complicated staging apparatus. Over this physical dimension of the garden, she lays the symbolic foundation, using mythological allegories to situate the new vicereine, Countess of Paredes, in a particular sociopolitical status among her female peers, but most particularly in relation to the author herself. In making the vicereine and herself holders of political and literary authority she also draws inspiration from platonic idealizations of poetry, as her garden is cultivated with verse and music but also grows as a little universe from its maker, the goddess-queen who rules it. Let us examine these matters in more detail.

## The Countess: Ruler of Her Own Universe

When Prince Baltasar Carlos de Austria was born in 1629, representatives of the city of Lima started preparing a great celebration. The festivities, which took place the next year, were commissioned in part by the minor merchants' guild. The merchants created a spectacular ephemeral garden in the city's square by planting

trees, hanging floral tapestries from walls and placing a plethora of statues representing mythological figures (Carvajal y Robles 42–45). Through this spectacle, which “was enchanted by means of artistry,” paraded all kinds of important governmental personalities (Carvajal y Robles 42).

The enchanted garden was a symbolic space that was certainly reserved to the celebration of the highest ranks of Spanish nobility. The one that was most likely to be the earliest of this kind was created for the reception of Isabel de Valois (1560). The University of Alcalá de Henares built it on the outskirts of the city, where the queen crossed a path inspired by the ancient *locus amoenus*, made with green meadows and animated by shepherds, singing children, young people in classical costumes, nymphs, and a sculpture of Fame, among other decorations. The rich iconographic program of the welcome to the queen, with abundant presence of mythological images, was an apology of the Christian humanism that the university represented. When the queen entered the city of Toledo, the Garden of the Hesperides was also artistically recreated (Gómez López 211–12).

The little enchanted garden created by Sor Juana’s loa brings the mythological creatures that inhabited it to life by means of acting. Given that the Countess of Paredes is a character of the play, her pilgrimage through the orchards became part of the dramatic action. Even though the true identity of the queen of the garden is only explicitly stated toward the end of the play, she is presented right at the beginning. Trading her usual habitat at the starry sky, she descends to the earthly paradise which is virtually created by her own presence:

#### Music

Today the queen of lights,  
 moved to the forests  
 she traded for a flower seat  
 the throne of the stars  
 and with the contact of her footprints  
 the flowers coming out  
 to the others they say:  
 “Come out, hurry, hurry,  
 flowers and you kiss her beautiful soles.”<sup>5</sup> (Cruz 265–66)

The flowers the queen of lights creates herself when entering her earthly paradise are the ones who praise her beauty and pledge allegiance to her. In this sense, presenting the vicereine as creator and ruler of her own particular universe was in line with the kind of power women like her exercised in viceregal courts. Their political role was quite different from what was previously thought. Although subjected to male authority, the women of the aristocracy managed a wide field of action. Only apparently marginalized from political activities, they had, for example, a strong influence in the granting of those positions that their husbands assigned to their loved ones. Although they did not appear at official events alongside their husbands, in social life they imposed patterns of behavior. The vicereines were also models of what was expected of the noble woman and played a symbolic role. Both the vicereine and her husband were for the inhabitants of the American territories the living image of the Queen and King of Spain and they were situated in a space of power that allowed them to act quite freely, although always within the limits imposed on their gender by the customs and prejudices of these so-called Ancient Regime societies (Rubial García 44). The space where the vicereines had the most influence was precisely the palace, where their presence was continuous and so important that during the governments in which they were absent, whether because viceroys were widowed or single, there was practically no court life (Rubial García 14).

María Luisa was certainly ruler of her own little universe inside the limits of courtly life. However, it seems the themes of the play do not precisely celebrate attributes related to domesticity, married life, or courtly duties. Beauty is in this play related to platonic conceptions of poetry and erudition, aiding the construction of the image of a vicereine apt for cultural transcendence.

The countess is the linkage between the stars, the flowers, and the very poetry that makes up the fabric of the play. All these images refer us again to the divine garden, particularly from the perspective of rhetoric. The concept of the “collection of flowers” has existed at least since it was described in the oral sources of the garden or forest of invention, a place (*loci, topoi*) from which themes could be extracted to produce discourses, poems or “honey.” In this imaginary, associated with inventio, the poem itself



constituted a florilegium (Latin), anthology (Greek), or compendium of flowers of rhetoric or famous and beautiful sayings of the Ancients (Slater 46). The image of the field of flowers as reflection of the starry one in the sky incorporated the platonic conception of the universe to discourses of poetic invention and imitation. The predilection in Spain of this image over others with a similar function, such as those of the thesaurus or the loci, is no coincidence, given that the seventeenth century was a time when the taste for creative freedom was expanding considerably. While the thesaurus suggested a separate accumulation of data, understanding the literary work in floral or botanical terms implied that the act of combination was more important than the origin of the elements to be combined. Furthermore, since the number of flowers is, like the number of stars, potentially infinite, the act of combination (by the imitation technique) is governed only by the limits of taste (Slater 47).

An important connotation of this rhetorical conception of the garden related to the Countess of Paredes is that these flowers, the ones bearing poetry, unlike the ordinary ones, were meant to resist the test of time. They were as eternal as the starry lights they reflected, and this metaphor is, precisely, again reiterated in the last verses of the loa:

That the most beautiful Pomona  
and the loveliest Flora  
have the beauty of the rose  
but the durability of stars. (Cruz 278)

Seventeenth-century poets were well aware of how writing and publishing verses could immortalize them through fame. This is why it was not uncommon to find abundant references in poetry books to their “durable flowers,” creations of the intellect that grew in a nature engendered by artifice or as a result of the architectural work of the horticulturist that, like God, made their own universe. This is how, for example, the paratexts of the spectacular poem-garden *Paradise Closed for Many, Gardens Open for All* (1652) by Pedro Soto de Rojas describe the flowers of poetry from the work. The approval for printing by the censor of the chancery of Granada states:

I feared that such an excellent work would suffer the common ailment of flowers, the universal misfortune of trees, which only a few hours dull them [...]. But once those fears have been redeemed, I look at them as eternal, I consider them durable, since a learned gardener has made them and transplanted them to more lively leaves, where, without suffering the risk of expiring in a few hours, they will always breathe the amber of erudition. (Soto de Rojas 75–6)

The image is significant not only because of the massive presence of the garden as a syncretic image of Judeo-Christian and ancient pagan origins but because the “durability” of the countess is precisely presented by the firsts and last verses of the composition, those who structurally always are meant to condense the essence of a poem. Yes, fame among members of the court was an important part of political propaganda about royal women, which is why a statue representing it was placed in the enchanted garden constructed by the University of Alcalá de Henares to welcome Isabel de Valois. However, as it was made by poetry, Sor Juana’s garden had more potential to transcend in time that whatever other transformed by a one-time festivity (whether because it was improvised in an existing garden or the result of an ephemeral construction in the city spaces).

While the kind of transcendence great poets aspired to was rarely associated with women poets or noble women, Sor Juana presented the ladies of the viceregal court with an image of the new vicereine that exalted her capacity to create a new universe of her own in the court. It was certainly important to make allegiances with servers of the crown, like the ladies of the court, but the ideal woman that the countess embodied, at least on this occasion, exceeded the virtues usually associated with aristocratic women, making her the image of a cultured vicereine with the capacity of creating her own entourage of well-read women. She already counted with the support of the most erudite of them all, Sor Juana herself.

The arrival of María Luisa in Mexico must have been for Sor Juana a cause for celebration that went beyond all mandates expected of her as a loyal subject. The Countess of Paredes was close to her age. She was well read and she loved poetry, traits

that could support a bond beyond expected standards of loyalty based on hierarchy. The countess was also a descendant of the quite famous poet Jorge Manrique and her grandmother, Luisa Enrique Manríquez de Lara. She was a literate woman who authored devotional books and poetry and who served Isabel de Borbón and became a Carmelite nun in her later years (Calvo and Colombi 48). Therefore, it is no surprise that the new vicereine would be inclined to appreciate Sor Juana's genius and this was a circumstance worthy of joyous celebration because, as Rubial García has pointed out, the cultured and refined vicereines were the exception rather than the rule (39). The divine, poetic garden created and governed by a goddess-like woman was an allegory that was also supported by the female characters of the play, which was based on pagan ancient traditions, as we will see below.

### **Flora, Pomona, and the Nymph: Cultivating the Garden of Ladies**

The mythological creatures that inhabit Sor Juana's garden bear a close relationship with natural creation but also with poetry itself. It seems appropriate that Pomona would make an appearance on this stage, given that she in Roman mythology is the goddess of fruit, fruit trees, gardens, and orchards. She is a symbol of abundance but especially of careful cultivation of nature. Caring for gardens was "her love, her passion / Venus was nothing to her." She loved her gardens so much that Vertummus, god of seasonal change, and many other suitors had to bear her repeated rejections because she feared they, "rustic" as they were, would disturb her beloved "closed orchard" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 357–58).

Pomona's opponent in the play, Flora, is a symbol of fertility. This "mother of flowers," the origin of important Roman festivities celebrated in May, was granted a fragrant garden by her husband Zephyrus. Although the garden was filled with noble flowers, the earth was monochromatic; she was the "first to scatter new seeds" in a field that till then "had been of but one color." She was also the first one to create a rare new kind of flower "out of Therapnaean blood" (Ovid *Fasti* 75–77).

This lineage of female, divine creators of natural little worlds is where Sor Juana inscribes the Countess of Paredes, but also

where she places herself. Studies of Sor Juana's theater have noted that she often represents herself in her pieces. Judith Farré Vidal points out that appearing as "interlocutor" of the powerful people that she praises could be considered an authorial mark on her texts (64). For Poot-Herrera the nymph of the *Loa in the Orchards* is the "virtual and poetic voice of the writer" (253).

I agree that this is the case but would add the entrance of the Nymph is literary evidence of the author's presence in her own play. She describes herself in these terms:

Nymph

Listen: I am a nymph  
of these beautiful gardens,  
in whom spring  
enjoys exemptions from the rigor of time.  
This is what I am,  
but other than that  
I am plenipotentiary  
of all his fragrant pleasant kingdom. (Cruz 340)

The nymph is not only the ultimate judge deciding who is the rightful queen of the garden. In a game of mirrors, she also declares herself "plenipotentiary," that is, representative of a government or a state and, therefore, invested with full powers to discuss or negotiate political matters. This state is not opposed to the republic of poetry (one could even say the republic of letters). She is a diplomat serving Apollo, ancient patron of music and poetry.

The staging of symmetry between the author and the political figures she represents has been identified by scholarship as relevant to understand Sor Juana's colonial subjectivity. Some studies have focus on the multiple references to local cultures and ethnicities in the Americas and New Spain that she includes in her carols and religious theater plays (Martínez-San Miguel 13). Her depictions of Catholic evangelization in those texts have been interpreted as allegories of indigenous resistance or vindications of American subjects and knowledge as integral parts of the Spanish Catholic community. The *Loa in the Orchards* does not incorporate specific elements of indigenous or other subaltern cultures, like other pieces by Sor Juana do, but could fit in the broader definition of Sor Juana's literary projection as a Creole subject (which reaches

her secular theater as well as prose works): that where the author represents herself as equal to people of European descent born in Europe (Martínez-San Miguel 14). More accurately, it seems to be the author's knowledge, and artistry as a New Spain born writer, that is leveled up against European poetic tradition.

All the characters in the loa are presented with a counterpart. The nymph is paired with Apollo, whom she represents, Flora and Pomona with their respective lovers, and the vicereine is implicitly, if only just for her title, paired with the viceroy (who is absent from the play). Nonetheless the ladies of this garden act with an agency that surpasses the apparent authority that their male counterparts would symbolically exert over them. It seems that this garden is a place created, governed, and meant to be enjoyed by ladies. When the famous humanist and vindicator of exemplary women Christine de Pizan symbolically excavated the earth to lay the foundation for her *City of Ladies*, she also resorted to the idealized natural place where knowledge, wisdom, and poetry grew. Lady Reason prompted her by saying: "Get up, daughter! Without waiting any longer, let us go to the Field of Letters. There the City of Ladies will be founded on a flat and fertile plain, where all fruits and freshwater rivers are found and where the earth abounds in all good things" (de Pizan 16).

The exhortation in voice of Reason also gives ground to a female subject position that resonates with the articulation of subjectivity in Sor Juana's *Loa in the Orchard*.

## Conclusion: A Poetic Mirror for Female Authority

Owing to its space of representation, Sor Juana's *Loa in the Orchards* joins a long European literary and staging tradition that appeals to the garden as a place of formal beauty and symbolic value related to divine authority. However, she goes beyond other artistic manifestations that framed political figures in this particular representation system.

The idealized vision of antiquity supported in her loa an image of the Countess of Paredes as a vicereine who would become not only a model of piety, maternity, and physical beauty but of erudition, sensibility, and a female taste for poetry. When thinking

about patronage and clientelism we often suppose asymmetrical relations in which the artist or writer benefits greatly from the protector but forget how much the powerful benefit from the masters of the arts. Sor Juana often proudly represented herself in her texts and deserves to be included in the symbolic empowerment that her works conveyed.

Bringing the ladies of the court to witness the new vicereine's entrance into the enchanted garden graced by music and the poetry composed by Sor Juana could possibly entail a hope that the court in the future would have its own academy of ladies, who would visit the orchards surrounding the palace and enjoy poetry just like the humanist academies did in Renaissance gardens. Such an endeavor could only be possible if women of the court, guided by the vicereine, started to integrate in intellectual endeavors like only a few like Sor Juana attempted to do.

Lastly, I will note that the great emphasis on the metaphors and allegories of poetry and poetry composition made in the loa points to other functions that go beyond its occasional representation. Like the verses suggest, good poetry was meant to last for years to come, especially if it was printed. The publication in Madrid of this loa within the collected works of Sor Juana in 1689, which was made possible precisely thanks to the Countess of Paredes, was probably not just an afterthought following the theatrical staging but a natural resolution for a text that could also be enjoyed as reading. Thanks to that publication, filled with poems about the countess, both women, the writer and her protector, achieved the real historic and subjective transcendence the *Loa in the Orchard* symbolically evoked.

## Endnotes

1. Research for this chapter has been carried out with the financial support of the Ministry of Economy, Knowledge and Employment of the Canary Islands' Government, through the Aid Program Catalina Ruiz for Training of Research Staff.
2. The loa was a subgenre of the short theater cultivated in the so-called Spanish Golden Age. In the sixteenth century, it was a short verse composition staged before the main acts of a comedy.

At first it had the form of a monologue; later it became a dialogue with considerably more action. It was usually preceded by some musical tones of guitar, vihuela and harp, sometimes sung, which were reiterated at its conclusion. During the seventeenth century, the loa stopped serving as a prolegomena to a main work, growing its dramatic complexity and acquiring an outstanding status even though it remained a fairly short theatrical piece. The palatine or palace loa was commissioned to the writer for the theatrical shows that were part of the royal festivities; after a brief plot, it ended with a song of praise to the monarch (Rivera 127–128).

3. If not indicated otherwise, all translations into English are mine.
4. Poot-Herrera explains how *Loa in the Orchards* was most likely composed to be represented by the ladies of the palace, constituting a highly feminine piece, significantly different in terms of theatrical performance space. The performance points to the peregrination of the vicereine and her ladies-in-waiting, particularly outside the palace, in a walk around the many orchards that surrounded Mexico City, like those between Tlaxpana and Tacuba (238).
5. In the original Spanish version for flowers, *plantas*, can also be translated as “plants” but the word has an ambiguous meaning because it can also mean *plantas de los pies* or “soles of the feet.”

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# 11. Descartes's Grotto Automata: Staging the Baroque Subject after 1650

Alison Calhoun

## Summary

This chapter proposes the entertainment grottoes of Saint-Germain-en-Laye as a plausible birthplace for Descartes's troubling, "un-Cartesian" questioning of the ideal rational subject. While during Descartes's lifetime there were limits to how far he could pursue a subjectivity that refused a clean break between mind and body, after his death the grotto and the automata residing in its depths, this time as theater technology, continued to serve as sources for developing the baroque subject in the forms of machine theater, machine plays, and opera. Case studies of Jacques de Vaucanson (machinist), Jean Berain (set designer), and Jean-Baptiste Molière (playwright/actor/director), all practicing in the period specifically following Descartes's death, demonstrate how theater was a fertile ground for experimenting with the unsettling relationship in nature between humans and machines. But, in an almost reverse of the rational subject we associate with Descartes and the *cogito's* radical human exceptionalism, these moments in the history of theater and drama reveal a Cartesianism of Descartes's grotto, that is to say a meeting place where it is possible for a spectator to experience their own mechanical qualities, while simultaneously experiencing the potential consciousness of the objects around them. Psychology, or what Gary Hatfield has termed Descartes's "machine psychology," is at the heart, I will argue, of this process that unites Descartes's grotto automata with the theater.

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## Introduction

Early modern scholars have for some time complicated if not completely rejected the idea that after Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), whose “baroque” subject grappled with a form of autonomous, preconscious sensation, Renée Descartes’s (1596–1650) subject from the so-called “Age of Reason” ushered in the rational order of Cartesian dualism and its *cogito*.<sup>1</sup> Instead, scholars have begun to consider how the baroque disorientation we feel comfortable associating with the end of the French Renaissance continued and was an important part of the Cartesian world. For example, we now know that the semantics of Cartesian *inconcussum* garnered unwarranted support for its relationship to certitude, in part because of a mistranslation, translated into French as *indubitable*, when it is more literally *inébranlable* or, even, *insensible* (Erlmann 15, 20). In the traditional reading of this moment at the beginning of the Second Meditation (AT, VII, 24), the outdated narrative suggested that something like Montaigne’s utterly shaken human subject in the face of the *branloire* turns into the rational, incontrovertible Cartesian subject. But when we look in particular at the dissemination of Cartesianism after Descartes’s death, including the publication of works like the *Treatise on Man*, we find utterly un-Cartesian instances that challenge the ideal rational subject, presenting instead cases of the interference of corporeality on rationality in what Veit Erlmann has called Descartes’s “quest” for “resonant space,” or Descartes’s “resonant subject” (13).

Many of the studies that look at moments of un-Cartesian Descartes reread the animal-machine and Descartes’s writings on automata, especially in *The Passions of the Soul* and the *Treatise on Man*, and the present study is no exception. What I am hoping to add to the debate is a focused study of the role of place in Descartes’s vision of the human-machine, both in the place where he initially observes the phenomenon and in the place where the phenomenon ends up thriving. David Bates writes that Descartes “was never really interested in the traditional philosophical division between mind and body we now associate with his name, but rather in a more ephemeral transition point between [...]”

the body and the kind of *pure* intellect that could be performed only by the soul" or a "liminal zone where body and mind meet" (48). I am interested in how, in addition to our better understanding of instances of mistranslation or of dissecting Descartes's oeuvre in its entirety, there emerges an important geography for this "liminal zone" that Descartes expresses when he describes automata in the grotto.

This chapter aims to demonstrate how Descartes's troubling, un-Cartesian subjectivity that refused to properly prove the clean break between mind and body, was born in the grotto but ultimately developed and prospered in machine theater, machine plays, and opera after Descartes's death.<sup>2</sup> Was there life and sensation in Descartes's grotto automata?<sup>3</sup> If so, how did the very nature of the grotto lend itself to a more elaborate development of this question in the theater? What if the grotto in the writing of Descartes sheds light on another way of thinking about human subjectivity after 1650?

Chad Córdova suggests Montaigne's treatment of the grotto's grotesque exemplifies Montaigne's posthumanist ethics. He describes a transformative process in which humans are not treated above or below nonhuman animals, and the human self is treated as "other to itself" (185). There is a similar ambiguity afoot in Descartes's automata in the grotto he describes in the *Treatise on Man*, making it difficult to discern whether the philosopher is going beyond normative modes of subjectivity or complicating a reiteration of the orthodox, rationalist subject, as Alain Vizieer would have us believe (691–92). I will not pronounce judgment on whether or not Descartes's grotto automata ultimately represent another humanism, posthumanism, or neither. Instead, I will suggest that the provocative nature of his subject facing the automata in the grotto influenced the design and reception of stage and entertainment machines in the second half of the seventeenth century, linking garden and stage machines to the continued expression of this ambiguity in the grotto by questioning anthropocentrism, human exceptionalism, and the normative subjectivity of traditional humanism. In this way, the baroque machine theater stage became an ideal extension of the grotto experiment, allowing spectacle, theater, and drama to question subjectivity in

ways that we might think about in terms of *another* Descartes or *another* humanism.

To examine the influence of Descartes's grotto automata on the treatment of the subject in theater after 1650, the following analyzes the relationship between Descartes and his observations and experiences with the Francini grottos at the royal gardens of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. I argue that Descartes's experiences in the grotto generated a troubling, unstable "shaping of subjectivity" (Johnson 1), because it is where machines seem alive, and yet where the grotto visitor feels like a mechanical object, a place where intellect and technology intersect in what a recent study has focused on as the site of *ingenium* (Garrod 14–15): a true intersection of what Bates characterizes as "pure intellect" and the body as automaton (45). In this moment of another Descartes,<sup>4</sup> the trouble is not that humans are machines or that machines are lively but rather that through experiments with nature it might be possible to experience what it is to be a nonthinking mind interacting with thinking bodies, at once to affirm and undo Cartesian dualism. For this reason, a timely conclusion to this chapter will look at the future of this perspective in the age of AI, and how these questions relate to our current environmental crisis and our increasing loss of human agency.

## Descartes's Grotto Automata

Descartes himself was explicit in his *Treatise on Man* (AT, 11: 130–31): Spending significant time observing and interacting with the automated machines of the hydraulic grottoes at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, illustrated in Salomon de Caus's *Les Raisons des forces mouvantes* (The Reasons for Moving Forces, 1615), he connected the dots between human and animal sense organs and machines (Riskin 47). In these waterworks, he studied the engineering of the Francini brothers (Tommaso and Alessandro), fountaineers but also machinists and architects (Lurin 307). In the *Treatise on Man*, when Descartes describes the role of the animal spirits in his conception of the nervous system, he turns to a grotto analogy:

External objects, which by their mere presence act on the organs of sense and thereby cause them to move in many different ways,

depending on the arrangement of the parts of the brain, are like strangers who on entering the grottoes of these fountains unwittingly cause the movements that take place before our eyes. For they cannot enter without stepping on certain tiles which are arranged in such a way that, for example, if they approach a Diana bathing they will cause her to hide in the reeds, and if they move forward to pursue her they will cause a Neptune to advance and threaten them with his trident; or if they go in another direction they will cause a sea monster to emerge and spew water in their faces; or other such things depending on the whim of the engineers who constructed them.<sup>5</sup> (*The World and Other Writings*, 107)

In his *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes also uses examples of technology like fountains to help describe the nuts and bolts of the natural world, and he was by no means the first to do so.<sup>6</sup> He essentially sought to efface the distinction between “artificial” and “natural” by putting engineering and technology on the same plane with the “wonders” of nature (Werrett 144), often uniting them in the context of spectacle. Descartes might be read as inviting his readers to think about their own bodies as theater and to use theater, especially theater technology, as a form of experiment in physiology. For Descartes, therefore, the grotto is not just about a “conflation of art and nature” (Werrett 141) but the place where the human passions meet their expression in technology. The key to understanding this conflation lies in abandoning the primacy of animation, or the obsession with who or what is setting the object in motion, and instead focusing on the experience of shared resonance. For it is precisely the indeterminate nature of who or what, human or machine, causes the trick to happen (Descartes is clear that it is a “*tromperie*” and not a “secret”) that the grotto automata perform the motions of decentering the Cartesian thinking subject (Werrett 132). The grotto was a site where the conflation between thinking subject and mechanical machine was possible to experience and also a place for generating multiple experiments of this kind. Most importantly, as a place of spectacle, the grotto paved the way for further exploration of this troubling subjectivity in the theater so that wonder and science, dualism and its undoing, could coexist on the stage.

To what extent is this Cartesianism perceptible in machine theater after 1650? The following will consider the impact of

Descartes on three entertainers: Jacques de Vaucanson (machinist), Jean Berain (set designer), and Jean-Baptiste Molière (playwright/actor/director), all practicing in the period specifically following Descartes's death. During this time, theater was a fertile ground for experimenting with the unsettling relationship in nature between humans and machines. But, in an almost reverse of the rational subject we associate with Descartes and the *cogito*'s radical human exceptionalism, these moments in the history of theater and drama take us to a Cartesianism of Descartes's grotto, that is to say a meeting place where it is possible for a spectator to experience their own mechanical qualities, while simultaneously experiencing the potential consciousness of the objects around them. Psychology, or what Gary Hatfield has termed Descartes's "machine psychology," is at the heart (16–21), I will argue, of this process that unites Descartes's grotto with the theater.

### **Vaucanson's *Spectacle des automates* and Descartes's Machine Psychology**

At the "Spectacle des automates" (1749), paying customers at the Paris Fairground Theater explored the workings of three automata designed and presented by Jacques de Vaucanson (1709–1782). In this rendering (Figure 11.1), announcing the exhibit, the automata appear from the front as they were placed throughout Europe after an initial stint of a few months in Paris.

Vaucanson's show exemplifies the subject in Descartes's grotto, because his automata complicate the relationship between natural and artificial, and the show engages in an experiment with the viewer-subject in which the viewer experiences both a sense of their own mechanics and a sense of the machine's potential for consciousness. The pedestals, like mini-stages, were left open at the back, exposing the robot's workings to visitors, who explored them from all angles, and the inventor was certain to demonstrate the workings at certain intervals so that part of the show was didactic: learning how the robot worked.<sup>7</sup> As an extension of Descartes's grotto, the mechanisms of these three seemingly disparate robots highlighted the same physiological principles that natural philosophers, many of them followers of Descartes, were using to describe the troubling intersection of soul and machine in



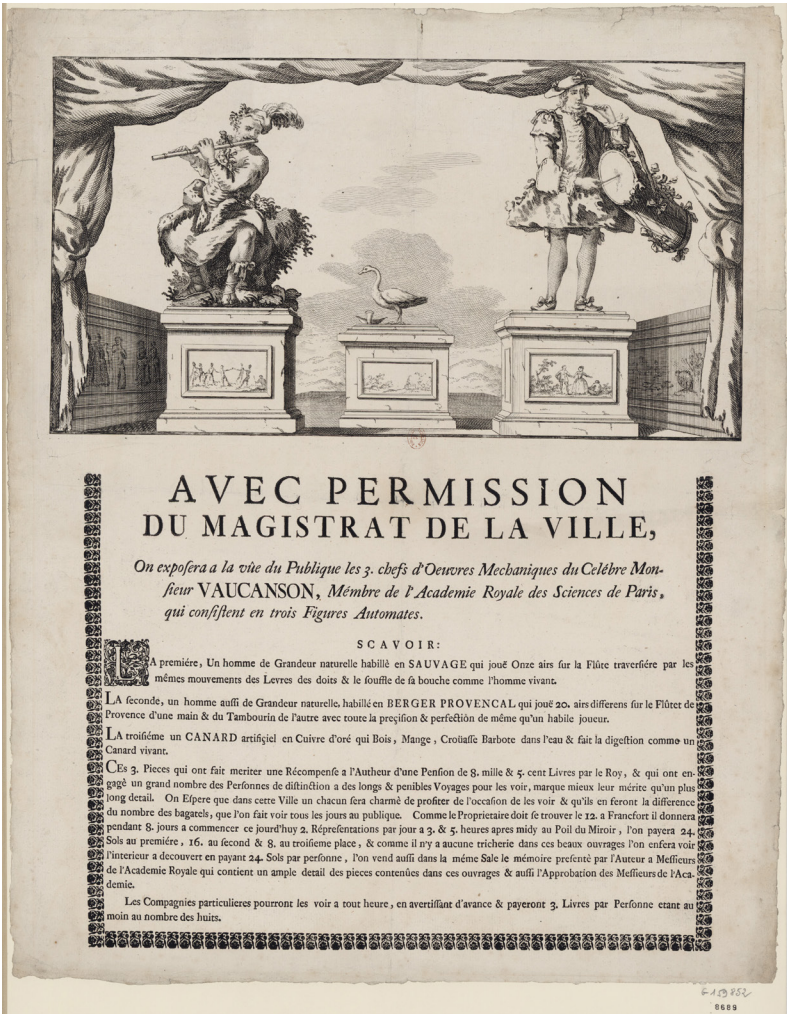


**Figure 11.1.** Engraving announcing the showing of Vaucanson's three automata (1750). Reproduced with permission from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

the mechanics of the passions. They were not meant to incite wonder, in other words, and they were not meant to be experienced and viewed like clocks or music boxes. Instead, this flute player, digesting duck, and Provençale drummer, reveal complex versions of three mechanical movements related to the Cartesian passions: pneumatics, hydraulics, and pulse. Vaucanson's *Spectacle des*



*automates* is a significant iteration of the grotto-turned-theater, since here an engineer working on robotics is also clearly working as an entertainer, poised to move his spectators and auditors, through a spectacle that questions the limits between organic and mechanical physiology.

If we were to agree, as Hatfield argues, that Descartes attempted to describe a “machine psychology,” influenced by the grottos of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, then this moment in the history of robots in theater is even more a reflection of the unusual evolution of Cartesian passions. To recall the machinic nature of the passions in Descartes’s writing, the animal spirits are distributed throughout the body via the blood which is heated in the heart, serving as a furnace, and as the animal spirits are moving in different ways (slow, agitated, fast) or in different quantities (abundant or not), or in different shapes, strengths, or thickness, they provoke movements that lead us to experience a variety of different passions. In the “staging” of the *spectacle des automates*, the artist-engineer Vaucanson appears to have united three seemingly unrelated robots. But when brought together their mechanisms reveal an ensemble of essential mechanical movements related to Cartesian passions, and to the troubling intersection those passions create between the mechanical and mindful subject. Like in Descartes’s grotto, in other words, the demonstrations for these three robots make the viewer-listener relive or experience the ambiguity of their own inner workings. They explore how the movement and distribution of the animal spirits, as was the process for feeling the passions in the Cartesian model, could be both breath and pneumatics, how digestion could be hydraulics, even in what may have been perceived as a “subhuman” animal, and how our heartbeat might be a pump. Most importantly, as a spectacle with a dramatic reveal and with a theatrical component, the public coming to the show would have experienced real-time vibrations and resonances emphasizing their inhuman subjectivity.<sup>8</sup>

The Flute Player, Vaucanson’s most famous android, since it appeared in the *Encyclopédie* under the entry for “Androïde” (Riskin 119), demonstrated the principal of pneumatics. Pneumatics are linked to some of the most complex areas of human physiology precisely because wind, like the concept of the Greek *pneuma*, lies at the

threshold between material and immaterial (even spiritual when linked to the soul), sensible and insensitive, perceptible and imperceptible. We see a flute player, in other words, but the experience we have of his performance mirroring how our bodies function pneumatically overshadows the tune the instrument is sounding. For Descartes, our “animal spirits” were like “tiny winds,” and, though they were transported throughout the body via the blood, evoking fountain imagery and plumbing, there are also proto-pulmonary moments in the Cartesian machine where the body breaths like a pipe organ. Descartes was not alone. Although they did not seek to explain the passions, Jean Fernel (coiner of the term “physiology”) in the sixteenth century and Galen before him referred to wind instruments to describe human functions. Galen, for example, compared the trachea to a flute and the epiglottis to “the tongue or reed of panpipes” (Riskin 54). Modeling how the body uses winds by dissecting a musical instrument would have been one very interesting experiment-demonstration, similar to de Caus’s machine drawings of the water organs at Saint-Germain-en-Laye. However, such an approach would not have mounted the theatrical moment, the grotto experience, that unfurled when the flutist played. Vaucanson had to produce a mechanism that would vary blowing pressure and tongue stops. He spent time carefully observing flute players in order to devise his levers, springs, weights, and gears in addition to an axle with cranks that powered three sets of bellows, three windpipes, cylinders with cams, and so forth (Riskin 119). Like Descartes’s subjectivity in the grotto, spectators of the flute player would not have felt their humanity reduced to automatisms. Instead, they were invited to think about what they have in common with the machine, the ambiguity (human-machine) of their own physiology.

Vaucanson’s digesting and defecating duck demonstrates the physiology of hydraulics, inviting the spectator to think about his or her inner plumbing just as they might meditate on the workings of a grotto fountain. Moreover, the spectator engages in this reflection in front of a small animal, noticing their similarities, releasing itself from human superiority, by uniting the mechanical and the rational in the machine and the (no longer subhuman) animal (human or not). Since hydraulics was how Descartes saw

the animal spirits moving throughout the body via the blood, this automaton's animation was also part of the exploration of the passions, though this time hidden in the Bakhtinian gut of a small water bird.

Vaucanson's duck may be small but the science behind it was magisterial. The size of the duck is a function of how difficult it was to attempt to replicate blood circulation, the cardiovascular system, digestion, and, perhaps the most complex yet, the nervous system. In fact, the desire to make a model for the circulatory system was an ambition French surgeons François Quesnay (1694–1774) and Claude-Nicolas Le Cat (1700–1768) actively pursued around this time, never to fully complete the task (Hankins and Silverman 183–84).

Finally, the Provençale musician extended the physiology of pneumatics in his complex piping of the pan flute while adding to it the tenet of the pulse or heartbeat that would have accompanied the flute as he played the drum. Vaucanson here is likely to have adopted William Harvey's pump theory of the cardiovascular system (as opposed to Descartes's outdated furnace theory), and his drummer's mechanism would have allowed his installation to represent the heartbeat as a perfect complement to the digesting duck's circulation, completed only by the two flute players' pulmonary motion. The mechanisms of visually heterogeneous machines, therefore, collectively represent most of the complex physiology involved in the movement of the animal spirits according to Descartes's machine psychology. The public witnessed their movements thanks to an encounter in this particular place, a kind of physiological theater that complicated the subjectivity of the spectator by implying unsettling intersections between the human, the machine, and the animal. Machine psychology in this context is not about secrets, since this theater is not about the enigma of animation. But the automata show did have an effect on the viewer like the one we can imagine in Descartes's grotto: a troubling unveiling that had mostly to do with a radical method of how to approach the human in which the human subject is decentered, leveled, and mightily surrounded by objects and others.<sup>9</sup>

It is no doubt in part owing to their liveliness that these machines tend to find themselves in theater-like demonstrations. The

theater may have been one of the least censored and yet, thanks to its interdisciplinarity, most fertile sites for experimentation and the development of these ideas. This means, in turn, that theater reception became a place where the viewer was consciously or unconsciously thinking about Cartesianism and made to be more aware of their body's mechanisms. Questioning this human-machine divide was rendered all the more powerful thanks to theater's inherent relationship with psychology and the emotions.

### Jean Berain and Animal–Human–Machine Symbiosis

During the French seventeenth century, the grotto was scenographically a traditional part of musical drama and opera at Versailles. In fact, for several years before its destruction in 1684, the Grotto of Thétys sat at the heart of the Versailles gardens, its interior and exterior serving as stage for Molière's (1622–1673) *Malade imaginaire* and Jean-Baptiste Lully's (1632–1687) pastoral, the *Grotte de Versailles* (La Gorce 308–17). As machine theaters were built, especially for Lully's early French operas, productions demonstrate a marked absence of historical, human subjects. Instead, perhaps in an effort to tread lightly on the human-machine divide in order to appease pious noble and royal patrons, many if not all of the machines staged in late seventeenth to early eighteenth-century French operas are mythological, often Ovidian characters and creatures. I suspect this spoke to the truly dangerous occupation that was shaping subjectivity in theater under royal patronage of the time, because the public wanted machines—that was clear—while the monarch's political agenda and, sometimes, piety continued to influence, censor, and modify artistic choices. Using imaginary, fantastical, and mythical worlds, however, allowed French opera artists and their machinists to deploy scenography and machines that reproduced the unsettling grotto experience that Vaucanson would later present, contained within a setting that spared theater artists from censorship.<sup>10</sup>

Opera machines operate on at least two levels. On the one hand, design drawings demonstrate the ways in which theater designers were not just engineers but also natural philosophers, working somewhere between anatomy and machinery, because of the way they studied, built, and executed their machines.<sup>11</sup> On

the other hand, I argue that the esthetics of the baroque stage, one in which we do not have a seamless execution of miraculous machines, but rather a visual reveal of many of the mechanisms working to make these movements possible, mimics or foreshadows Vaucanson's demonstrations and other surgical, anatomical, and mechanical demonstrations to come. In this way, the design, deployment, and reception of the opera machines are in line with that of the Vaucanson robots, generating a potential for the viewer to experience the trouble in the grotto or the ambiguity of machine psychology. This argument may in some ways oppose the idea of machines as a promotion of seventeenth-century *merveilleux*, because Cartesian wonder (for Descartes, the process leads the subject to become like a statue, AT, XI, 383), despite it being the essential passion for the development of philosophical thought, separates the thinking from the mechanical and the bodily. The kind of passion these machines incite does the opposite of creating such a break separating body and mind, human and machine, and instead, as in the grotto, forges an unsettling ambiguity, coexistence, or intersection. Rather than shock and distance the viewer from their everyday, the spectator gets sucked in and might even feel a kind of symbiosis with the movements of these machines and their own physiological movements. An example is the tree transformation in *Atys*.

Although we cannot be certain what machine was used in 1676 opera *Atys*, one possible way of staging *Atys* as a tree would have been to hand the actor some branches and have him step into this simple machine depicted in the design drawing in Figure 11.2. Mythological drama from the baroque is filled with such transformations, but these scenes, rather than eliciting marvel and astonishment, are often the site of overwhelming grief, scenes of partial death and great lamentation. The machine's artisanal instead of occult quality, aiming for ambiguity rather than spectacular magic, helps it achieve a more affective status on the stage, once again because it appears to be an esthetic that stems from the grotto experience. In *Atys*, if the machine in Figure 11.2 were used, the tripartite nature of the figure as, at once, human, tree, and machine would have added an unsettling quality to the scene, eliciting Cartesian questions of whether we are superior to plants or similar to simple machines. In the design drawing, we continue

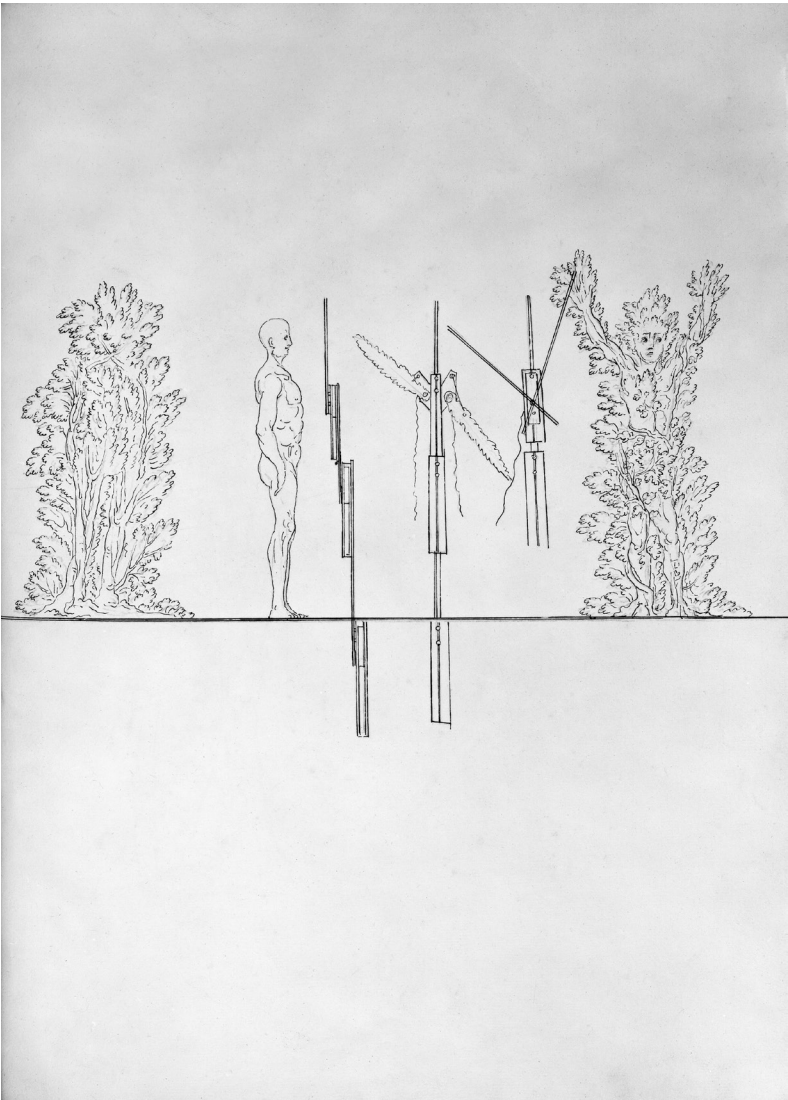


**Figure 11.2.** Copy of theater design drawing after Jean Berain, seventeenth-century France, Tessin Hårleman Collection, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. *Photo: Nationalmuseum.* Public domain.

to see that it is a human figure, a machine, and a tree, which works well with the dramatic tension of loss and rebirth. It is a perfect microcosm for the complex subjectivity of the human being in a Cartesian world turning increasingly toward mechanism, one

in which nature itself is mechanical. In the sung text from the *Atys* transformation scene, written by librettist Philippe Quinault (1635–1688), the lexical field includes words like cries, regrets, and groans, confirming that this is a grieving scene (V, 6, 74).<sup>12</sup> In addition, the final scene would have been accompanied by the reverberations of the theater space, thanks to the use of sound machines for thunder (V, 7, 77). This baroque subject, promoting the liminality and tripartite nature of *Atys*, thanks to its artisanal qualities and push for ambiguity, renders it a far more poignant example of a psychological experiment: The tragic that emerges from this scene lies within the interstices, where the subject is at once human and not human, machinic and organic, mechanical and natural. These troubling intersections had the potential to be more profoundly cathartic to the viewer than an abrupt magical or miraculous transformation into a tree.

The second set of drawings (Figure 11.3) shows copies from Jean Berain designs for chimera meant for Act IV of Lully and Quinault's opera *Bellérophon*, which premiered in 1679. These designs propose two ways of generating a moving or animated dragon: In the top half of the design is a flying dragon, and in the bottom half a sea dragon. For the sea dragon, operated by the human stagehand like a puppeteer, there is again a tripartite relationship between the movements of the human limbs, those of the animal, albeit here safely represented by a fantastical creature, and the movements of the machine. In the flying dragon, we see how the flying mechanism, maybe not the pulleys and weights that remained off stage but certainly some aspects of the ropes involved, would have been visible. These were not devised as mistakes or distractions, and they did not come about because the machinists were not technologically advanced enough to better hide their technology. Instead, I suspect the esthetic was one of the grotto, in which these elements served a (baroque) subject-forming, psychological role.<sup>13</sup>

## Molière's Machine

For Molière, the complex dramaturgical practice of at the same time creating and exposing the illusions of theater remains the most potent weapon against a world of illusion. (Spingler 367)



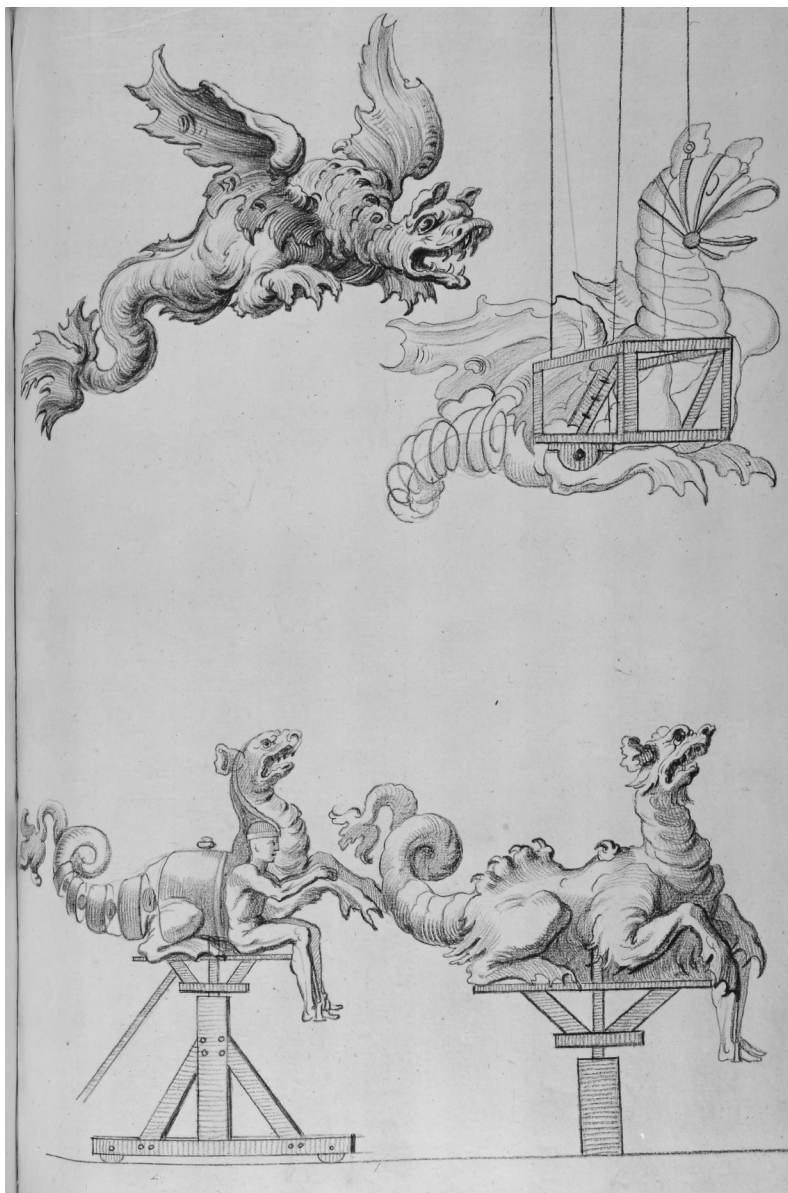


**Figure 11.3.** Copy of theater design drawings after Jean Berain, seventeenth-century France, Tessin Hårleman Collection, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. *Photo: Nationalmuseum.* Public domain.



If we rewind to 1665, to one of the most famous or infamous androids on the seventeenth-century French stage, the experience of Descartes's grotto automata brings new insight to Molière's machine in his *Don Juan ou le festin de pierre*. I am referring to Molière's nodding Commander machine in Act III, scene 5 of the play, where Don Juan forces his lackey, Sganarelle, to invite a burial statue of the man he recently killed to dinner. In the *didascalie* for this scene we read that the statue nods its head. This would have been a very simple weighted mechanism, likely manipulated by a stagehand. Nevertheless, it was a machine and not a costumed actor that Molière chose to use in this decisive moment in the play. Patrick Dandrey suggests, as I will, that this choice of a more clumsy, simple machine played a role in its interpretation:

Molière agreed to play the miracle game without unmasking the springs which behind the scenes mechanically move the symbol; but it nonetheless leaves open the interpretation that the spectator wishes to make of the supposed miracle, it leaves him the leisure of a double reading, by projecting the whole properly miraculous part of the myth into the noisy and somewhat childish play of the phantasmagorical machinery. (48)<sup>14</sup>

Christian Delmas has already studied *Don Juan* as one of Molière's earliest forays into the machine play, even though the artist did not yet have the sophisticated *salle des machines* that he would eventually have when he won the king's favor to produce *Psyche* in 1671 (machines by Vigarani). Roger Herzel's work has helped us understand that it was in fact a sumptuous set, with painted décor by Pierre Prat and Jean Simon, and with sets in the Italian style that would have been moved by hand in between each act (Herzel 944). Delia Gambelli reminds us that stage effects, especially at the final judgment scene, had been slammed by the critics for being too simple, too fake, and too unbelievable to bring any solemnness to the condemnation of the protagonist (Gambelli 47–48). Dandrey cites *Don Juan* as a moment that solidifies the theater as a place where the debate about faith can take place (Dandrey 41). But I like the conclusion that Marc Fumaroli gives, albeit in the context of *Tartuffe*, that Molière establishes the theater as a secular space. The use of machines in this secularizing

enterprise positions Molière's *Don Juan* as an important continuation of *Tartuffe*, this time using the nodding Commandeur statue to represent the pre-Cartesian, Catholic android to underline the enigma of animation and what Descartes might call trickery: Our reception of the nodding statue is one of shock, awe, and distance between human and machine. The nodding Commandeur, in other words, is no grotto automaton. Without the addition of Cartesian ambiguity, without symbiosis, and without any kind of reveal, audience members are separated from—instead of strangely *connected* to—the workings of the staged robot.

This might explain at least in part why Molière ended up working increasingly with more complex machines: First on *tragédie-ballet* with Vigarani's machines in *Psyche*, and then with *comedies-ballets* like his final *Malade imaginaire*, Molière incorporated more complicated and therefore more revealing stage machines in addition to his thoughts about human physiology including William Harvey, always in a Cartesian, troubling sense. It is significant that for the *Malade imaginaire* he staged his critique of medicine in front of a grotto (the Grotto of Thétys) (La Gorce 310–17). But, most importantly, Molière's focus on the relationship between machines and theater, operating in a steadily more secular space, was meant to highlight the anatomy and physiology of his theater as it might mimic and reflect the anatomy and physiology of the audience members. In sum, his productions increasingly recreated the grotto experiment.

Molière wanted his public to see the nodding head and recognize it as a break from the psychological work of theater, either targeting the statue as an example of failed religious theatrics or simply identifying the machine as bad theater. When we read Molière's machine as a critique of the enigma of bad theater, a machine that denies the grotto experience, dehumanizes the machine, we learn that Molière was also participating in a theatrical tradition of Cartesian discourse about the physiology of human emotions. For him, like for so many of his stage artisans, theater trafficked in emotions best when it exposed its complex machinations and liminalities. Furthermore, the audience went to the theater to see those machinations reflected and exposed, because the relationship between the audience and the set was a kind of

demonstration, like the machine psychology of Vaucanson's automata. This would in turn paint Molière as a natural philosopher who saw the theater as a scientific enterprise, a psychological enterprise, with incidental blasphemy.

### **Conclusion: From Enlightenment “Dehumanization” to the Return of Machine Psychology?**

Staging the grotto experiment did not last long. Cartesian machine psychology as a mentality that emerged in the culture of musical drama and machine theater grew out of the rise of mechanical thinking after Descartes's death. One factor that decidedly diverted this mentality was the industrial potential of viewing certain humans as machines in a growing slave-based economy. Many machine tinkerers and automata builders of the eighteenth century were themselves naturalist explorers and slave traders (Riskin 145; Jones-Imhotep 11). In this context, Descartes could still be used to make an argument about the animal-machine, but now the focus was on a certain group of humans, their rational souls, and their “superior” ability to reason and have intellect (Riskin 146). This shift in the utility of Cartesianism meant that the paradigm of the grotto, an above all psychological experiment, no longer served these thinkers in their economic endeavors. Even Vaucanson turned from his automata experiments to a project for an automated loom in order to help France increase its silk textile production and compete with Italy.

In addition to the labor market, there was also a heated response to radical materialism in works like Julien Jean Offray de la Mettrie's (1709–1751) *Man a Machine* (1748) (Wellman 272–85). La Mettrie's purely materialist treatise refused the existence of an immaterial soul while maintaining the enigma of animation: He acknowledged that part of our innate shortcomings as mere clocks is that we are completely ignorant about what sets us in motion (La Mettrie 105). For La Mettrie, this mystery of animation was the only difference between living beings and machines, as machines were completely understandable, less artful and less complex in their organization. What was previously, in the Cartesian model, an organization and drive for intelligibility that united humans and animals with machines, became, in

the materialism of the later part of the eighteenth century, dictated by questions of dividing superior humans from inferior ones along with animals and the inanimate across sentimental lines. The robot's mechanism was no longer revealed as a virtue of its tie to physiological intelligibility but rather its function as a "mere" machine, or instrument, that had to be operated (mastered) by a (superior) human being.<sup>15</sup>

I suspect this sort of distinction features prominently in a late-eighteenth-century emphasis on staging the human operator and displaying dominance over the machine, reflecting an industrial outlook in an age of slavery. But it is also important to consider how this turn away from the Cartesian animal-machine may have significantly altered the reception of stage robots and stage machines. Whereas the baroque subject of Descartes's grotto automata was a subject who experienced the human-machine convergence, what today we have more recently studied in terms of "vibrant matter," and therefore a critical and experimental relationship with automatism, the automata and robots on stage in the later part of the eighteenth century focused on the enigma of animation. Instead of convergence, the divide between human and machine was recemented in plays that underlined the relationship between humans as makers and animators of machines and machines as "mere" machines. By restoring the enigma of animation, accentuating the great divide between the human and the machine, robots at the dawn of the industrial age revived the medieval and Renaissance religious distance between viewers and stage technology, a distance that has arguably only very recently shrunk in our digital age.

Today, especially in the ways in which AI attempts to unite or blur the lines between the natural and the artificial, we might wonder to what extent we are returning to a paradigm of machine psychology. One critical difference is that with AI, while we might experience an increased sensibility of the machine and its ability to react with ever more natural responses, we the users do not slip into feeling our own mechanical qualities: We neither identify with the intelligibility of something like an android nor consider to any length the computing behind our digital communications and interactions. The consequences have been that, instead of a return to the encounter in the grotto, one in which we question

the automatism both of our own bodies and those of the machine, we are simply more and more desensitized to the experience, unaware of its ecological consequences, and, increasingly, unable to harness our human agency. Today, as opposed to the industrial distinction of (some) humans from machines in the slave economy of the Enlightenment, it is the loss of human agency in our increased use of AI that is in the economic interest of most companies seeking growth and expansion. In contemporary theater, it is therefore perhaps the rise of climate theater and other forms of theater built to resensitize us and awaken us to this loss of subjectivity that could revive machine psychology. Highlighting different relationships between humans and nature throughout history, and generating experiences before or outside of AI, climate theater in particular holds the power to take us back to the grotto.

## Endnotes

1. Some recent examples of reading Descartes against the dualist tradition are Des Chene; Charles Wolfe, Christoffer Eriksen, and Barnaby Hutchins. Quotations from Descartes in the following will be cited from the Adams and Tannery edition of his *Oeuvres* as (AT, tome number, and page number). In the following, translations are my own unless otherwise cited.
2. While Descartes makes use of the automaton on a few occasions in his published work (for example in the *Méditations* AT, IX, 1, 25 and *Passions de l'âme*, AT, I, art. 21, 344–45), his grotto automata appear in writings that he feared to publish during his lifetime, and were only posthumously published (for example in the *Traité de l'homme*, AT, 11:130–31).
3. I borrow this expression as a way of dialoguing with Córdova's "Life in the Grotto."
4. Cottingham uses "trialism" to better describe the phenomenon in "Cartesian Trialism" (218–30).
5. "Les objets extérieurs, qui par leur seule presence agissent contre les organes de ses sens, & qui par ce moyen la déterminent à se mouvoir en plusieurs diverses façons, selon que les parties de son cerveau sont disposées, sont comme des Étrangers qui, entrans

dans quelques-uns des grottes de ces fontaines, causent eux-mêmes sans y penser les mouvemens qui s'y font en leur presence: car ils n'y peuvent entrer qu'en marchant sur certains quarrceaux tellement disposez, que, par exemple, s'ils approchent d'une Diane qui se baigne, ils la feront cacher dans les rozeaux; & s'ils passent plus outre pour la poursuivre, ils feront venir un Neptune qui les menacera de son trident; ou s'ils vont de quelque autre costé, ils en feront sortir un monstre marin qui leur vomira de l'eau contre la face; ou choses semblables, selon le caprice des Ingenieurs qui les ont faites" (AT, XI, 131).

6. We could certainly call this a Galenic influence. Galen refers to the body as a fountain in Galen, *On the Natural Faculties*, III.15.

7. As the announcement states in Figure 11.1, Vaucanson's book, *Le Mécanisme du flûteur automate*, was made available for sale during the exhibit.

8. For more on inhuman subjectivity, but also on the "posthuman inhuman," see Zalloua, *Being Posthuman*.

9. In this sense, a machine psychology born out of Descartes's experience in the grotto is both posthuman and the recognition of the inhuman.

10. Laura Naudeix and Catherine Kintzler have both worked on the idea of the *merveilleux* as a meta-poetics that helps the dramaturge build a world and bring the spectator into it.

11. For more on the relationship between stage design and natural philosophy, see Tkaczyk (77–117); and Calhoun (114–26).

12. References to *Atys* are from Philippe Quinault, *Atys*, Paris, Ballard, 1699 and cited as (act, scene, page number) from this edition.

13. I am using "baroque" subject here in opposition to "rational" subject.

14. My translation.

15. See, for example, Cuinet-Dorbeil's 1781 *L'Automate*, a one-act play with music presented at the Comédie Italienne, in which one actor pretends to be an automaton in order to trick an unwanted suitor away from his lover.

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## 12. Satirical Subversion of Subjectivation in Cyrano de Bergerac's *The Other World*

Dennis Meyhoff Brink

### Summary

Belief in demonology and witchcraft in early modern Europe entailed a particular subjectivation: It taught Europeans to see themselves as a “porous selves” (Taylor) open to demonic possession. Around 1650, however, satirical authors began to expose this conception of the subject as superstitious. In *The Other World*, Cyrano de Bergerac launched a powerful satirical attack on the prevailing belief in a porous subject. However, the scope of his satirical attack extended beyond this specific subjectivation, as it also challenged the emergent Cartesian conception of the subject as a firm ground, a “terra firma” (Hegel). The chapter thus argues that in *The Other World* the subject is neither a porous container nor a solid ground but rather a free-flowing imagination that views humanity from an interplanetary distance, thereby revealing the illusionary nature of its self-images. Furthermore, the chapter suggests that Cyrano introduces a new kind of celestial thinking, which constitutes an alternative to the “terran thinking” (Sloterdijk) that has dominated Western philosophy in the wake of Descartes.

### Introduction

A negative aspect of the spread of print culture in early modern Europe was the resultant proliferation of treatises on demonology and witchcraft, which began to appear in their thousands at the end of the fifteenth century (Muchembled 64–65). These treatises were typically authored by theologians, both Catholic and

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Protestant, who claimed that numerous men, and even more women, had been seduced by devils, inspired by evil spirits, possessed by demons, and the like. Some of them had allegedly signed a pact with the devil, while others engaged in sexual intercourse with demons. Some even ate unbaptized babies, and virtually all of them had been initiated into the practice of black magic, which they used to enchant or bewitch people or things (Muchembled 57–61). Theologians employed various labels to describe these individuals, including sorcerers, witches, magicians, and necromancers, thus establishing the foundational doctrine and discourse for the witch-hunts that took place in Europe from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. According to Brian Levack, some 90,000 Europeans were subjected to witch-trial in this period, about half of whom ended up being burned at the stake (*Witch-Hunt* 21). According to Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, there was “a preponderance of women accused, convicted, and executed at a ratio of about four to one [...] throughout Europe generally” (17).

In 1487, the first major treatise on demonology and witchcraft was published under the title *Malleus Maleficarum* or *Hammer of Witches*. This was authored by the Dominican friar and inquisitor Heinrich Kramer and set out meticulously the ways in which witches could be found, interrogated, tortured, convicted, and executed.<sup>1</sup> According to Kors and Peters, this treatise was not only “the first encyclopedia of witch belief” but also among the most influential, as it was “constantly cited in support of those beliefs by Catholics and Protestants down to the eighteenth century” (180). When the Reformation broke out in 1517, there were already around 20,000 copies of the *Hammer of Witches* in circulation in Europe, with a 13th edition published in 1523 and a 30th edition in 1669 (Muchembled 65; Grüter 92).

Theological treatises on demonology and witchcraft were often written in Latin, but even treatises written in vernacular languages were inaccessible to the majority of the European population, who were illiterate. Most people learned about demonology and witchcraft through sermons, public witch trials, hearsay, and the circulation of stories and images of demons and witches (Levack, *Witch-Hunt* 49–55; Muchembled 155, 179). In German speaking areas, the so-called devil books (*Teufelsbücher*), about

the omnipresence of devils and demons, circulated widely, and in French-speaking areas the very similar tragic stories (*histoires tragiques*) had “a truly extraordinary impact” according to Robert Muchembled (155, 178). In addition, numerous engravers, including renowned artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Hans Baldung Grien, and Lucas Cranach, crafted so-called witch images that gave shape to the doctrines of demonology. Many of these witch images were printed and reprinted by the thousands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, further contributing to the spread of demonological beliefs and world views (Kors and Peters 139–48, 249–58).

In 1626, the Swiss engraver Matthäus Merian the Elder crafted a copper engraving that united a series of demonological convictions in a single image entitled *Enchantment*. The focal point of this image is a frequently depicted scene of a group of witches convened around a cauldron of witches’ brew. According to popular belief, such brews were employed for the purpose of inflicting harm upon other individuals, for example by making them impotent or infertile (Levack, *Witch-Hunt* 9; Simek 261). In the background on the left, there is a procession of witches and sorcerers on their way to Brocken in Germany. This place was reputed to be a venue for so-called witches’ sabbaths, secret nocturnal gatherings where witches would engage in practices such as the sacrifice of children to the devil, sexual activities with demons, and other malevolent activities (Simek 157–58; Praetorius). In the background on the right, there is a depiction of a necromancer within a so-called magic circle. It was purported that such a circle could offer protection to those who summoned demons, as it was believed that these evil spirits were unable to enter such protective circles (Simek 207–14). At the top of the image, witches and sorcerers fly on forks and goats, associated with sinful sexual activities, a theme that is also addressed in the bottom left, where a witch “fornicates with the devil” according to the accompanying text.<sup>2</sup> In the bottom right, a group of witches consult books on black magic while other witches prepare a cruel ritual involving unbaptized babies. The image is accompanied by Latin and German verses describing the scenes and emphasizing that the depicted witches have “forsaken God and surrendered to Satan.”<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 12.1.** Matthäus Merian the Elder: *Enchantment* (1626). Staging demonological beliefs about sorcery and witchcraft. Courtesy: British Museum.

In the early twentieth century, Max Weber argued that to the early modern Europeans the world was “a great enchanted garden” (Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 22.2:442).<sup>4</sup> Before the onset of “the disenchantment of the world” that took place during the Enlightenment, Europeans inhabited an enchanted world populated by “mysterious and incalculable forces” such as spirits and ghosts (Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze* 536).<sup>5</sup> These invisible forces were perceived as beyond human control, although they might be influenced by means of prayers, amulets, rituals, and other uncertain methods. In the Christian world, these forces were often described as either good or bad spirits, or as angels and demons, which were believed to be able to enter human bodies through openings such as the mouth or ears (Simek 145, 153–54). In the case of an angel entering a person, it was commonly interpreted as a divine inspiration. Conversely, should a demon enter a person, it was generally perceived as a case of possession (Taylor 35–36). Following Weber, Charles Taylor has therefore argued that the inhabitants of the enchanted world saw themselves as fundamentally “porous,” that is, as beings that were inherently open to the

intrusion of external spirits such as angels and demons (29–41). And, because this self-perception implied the terrifying possibility of being possessed by evil demons, it was inextricably linked to a kind of fear that has become foreign to most of us today, because we perceive ourselves as “buffered” rather than “porous,” according to Taylor:

In the enchanted world of 500 years ago [...] the boundary around the mind was constitutionally porous [...] This porousness is most clearly in evidence in the fear of possession. Demons can take us over [...] Here is the contrast between the modern, bounded self—I want to say “buffered” self—and the “porous” self of the earlier enchanted world [...] The porous self is vulnerable, to spirits, demons, cosmic forces. And along with this goes certain fears which can grip it in certain circumstances. The buffered self has been taken out of the world of this kind of fear. (35–40)

As inhabitants of an enchanted world, early modern Europeans were continually told they had to live with the terrifying possibility of being tempted, influenced or taken over by demons. Treatises on demonology, sermons on sorcery, public witch trials, stories of diabolic temptations, and images of witchcraft all taught Europeans to see themselves as porous creatures vulnerable to the invasion of external demonic forces. This process of subjectivation clearly differs from the one Michel Foucault describes in his lectures on pastoral power, where he argues that “Western man has learned over millennia to see himself as a sheep in a flock” and “ask for his salvation from a shepherd,” that is, from a pastor, which is the Latin word for shepherd (134). According to Foucault, the Christian Church taught Europeans to be humble, submissive and obedient subjects by telling them they were like sheep in a flock in need of direction from a shepherd, that is, from a clerical leader (chaps. 5–7).

Despite the apparent differences between Foucault’s and Taylor’s theories of subjectivation, however, they are far from incompatible. If you are told *not only* that you are like a sheep in a flock in need of a shepherd/pastor to lead you to salvation *but also* that you are a porous creature susceptible to demonic invasion, then you need the care and guidance of a pastoral leader *even more*. Only a pastor can protect you from demonic forces

or drive them out by means of exorcism, should they already have entered you (Levack, *The Devil Within* chap. 4). Rather than contradicting each other, Foucault's and Taylor's theories of Christian subjectivation thus complement each other. Taylor's theory sheds light on a dimension of the process of subjectivation that was highly formative in the age of demonology but which remained underexplored in Foucault's account of pastoral power, namely the subjectivation of believers as porous subjects and the related clerical use of fear as a means of leading and directing the flock. Unlike Foucault, Weber and Taylor offer a vocabulary with which we can illuminate the role of fear and fearmongering in the exertion of pastoral power in the early modern era, a role that became a chief object of satire and critique during the Enlightenment.

### The Satirical Attack

In the second half of the seventeenth century, often labeled the early Enlightenment, an increasing number of authors began to ridicule the prevailing notions of the enchanted world and the porous subject. The French novelist and playwright Cyrano de Bergerac (1619–1655) was among the first and most radical satirists in this regard. In the open letter, *Against the Sorcerers* (*Contre les sorciers*), published in 1654, he courageously attacks the established belief in sorcery and witchcraft. Among other things, he argues that witches' confessions were untrustworthy, that witches' sabbaths were imaginary, that those who appeared to be possessed were putting on an act, that holy water was just plain water and therefore useless for exorcism, and that the cross was equally useless as it is just two pieces of wood. He openly declares: "No, I do not believe in sorcerers, although many great people have not been of my opinion, and I do not accept anyone's authority unless it is accompanied by reason," because "reason only is my queen, to whom I willingly subscribe" (2:111).<sup>6</sup>

In another open letter, entitled *For the Sorcerers* (*Pour les sorciers*) and also published in 1654, he uses a more satirical strategy: By putting all sorts of beliefs associated with demonology and witchcraft into one single story, he makes it all seem quite



implausible, if not downright crazy. In this letter, he not only claims that a flying broom has taken him to a desert where he meets the long-dead occult writer Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535); he also claims that Agrippa told him that he is the one who orchestrates the obscene ceremonies of the witches' Sabbath; that he makes people who come across witches on their way to the Sabbath see nothing but a group of cats; that he teaches witches and sorcerers how to turn themselves into werewolves and devour children; that he teaches necromancers how to torture their enemies by making a wax image of them and throwing it into the fire; that he knows the secret of enchanted coins that keep flying back to the owner's pockets; that he knows about ghosts, spirits, goblins, invocations, magic circles, magic mirrors, charms, talismans, and so on and so forth (2:102–9). According to Ishbel Addyman, "the average peasant [...] would see nothing to contradict in any of the individual elements of this list, but by putting them all together and attributing them all to one great sorcerer, Cyrano highlights the implausibility and ridiculousness of these superstitions" (150).

Cyrano's most elaborate ridicule of contemporary superstition, however, is found in his two satirical science fiction novels, *The States and Empires of the Moon* and *The States and Empires of the Sun*, published posthumously in 1657 and 1662 and collectively known as *The Other World* (*L'Autre Monde*). Although these novels were only published in heavily censored editions, they nevertheless contained a scathing attack on belief in demons, possessions, sorcery, magic, and the like (Chartier 118–20; Harth 31–41). In *The State and Empires of the Moon*, an unnamed first-person narrator tells the story of his journey to the moon, and at the beginning of *The State and Empires of the Sun* the returning narrator, now called Dyrcona, describes how his story was received. He explains that it was circulated clandestinely in Toulouse, where it soon became a bestseller but unfortunately also caught the attention of the authorities. As a consequence, a group of "long-robed beards" approached his friend and host, Monsieur de Colignac, claiming that Dyrcona had to be a magician and a sorcerer, as he could not possibly have visited the moon without making a pact with the devil (1:168).<sup>7</sup> When Monsieur



de Colignac gently urged them not to slander good people, they self-confidently replied that “no parliament understands sorcerers as well as ours,” indicating that they were members of the Parlement of Toulouse, one of the 13 provincial courts of the Ancien Régime and notorious for its strict enforcement of antiheresy laws (1:169; Chartier 109).<sup>8</sup> As recently as 1619, this Parlement had had the Italian philosopher Lucilio Vanini burned at the stake for blasphemy and atheism (Schneider 153). Now the representatives of the Parlement offer to have Dyrcona burned “without provoking a scandal” (1:170).<sup>9</sup> At first, however, they make the following accusation:

—The sorcerer we are accusing is the author of *States and Empires of the Moon*; he cannot deny that he is the greatest magician in Europe, after what he himself admits. How could he have ascended to the moon! Can that be done without the help of [...] I dare not name the Beast; but tell me, what was he going to do in the moon?

—Well asked! interrupted another. He was going to attend the Sabbath that was being held there that day. (1:169)<sup>10</sup>

By letting the “long-robed beards” put forward the rather fanciful notion that Dyrcona should have attended a witches’ Sabbath *on the moon*, Cyrano makes it clear that there was virtually no limit to the horror scenarios religious obscurantists could dream up. Apparently, it does not even worry the members of the Parlement that their assumption of the existence of witches, that is, humans, *on the moon* is in blatant contradiction to church doctrine, according to which the earth was the divinely designated home of humanity. As late as 1600, the Roman Inquisition had had the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno, who was a major inspiration for Cyrano, burned at the stake—partly for claiming there could be more inhabited worlds than earth (Kuhn 198–99). And in 1633, when Cyrano was a student at the Collège de Beauvais, the Roman Inquisition had compelled Galileo Galilei to renounce his belief that the earth was not the immovable center of the world (Fantoli 139). Yet here the very representatives of the extraordinarily antiheretical Parlement of Toulouse claim that the moon is inhabited by witches, thereby effectively *adopting* the heretical

view that the earth is not the only inhabited planet in the center of God's creation and attention. In a deeply satirical way, the novel thus exposes the inconsistency, if not absurdity, of the charges against Dyrcona.

## Misreading Descartes

Aware of the imminent threat, Dyrcona rushes to escape but is apprehended by a group of villagers led by a local priest who has filled their heads with "a thousand ridiculous tales about my enchantments" (1:172).<sup>11</sup> Trembling with fear, around 50 villagers, perceiving themselves as porous subjects in an enchanted world, approach the supposed sorcerer, singing *Kyrie eleison* ("Lord, have mercy") at the top of their lungs. As they get within reach, four of them, having first dipped their hands in holy water, grab him by the collar. After some deliberation, they decide to take a closer look at the books carried by the captured sorcerer's mule:

The first book they opened happened to be M. Descartes's *Physics*. When they saw all the circles with which the philosopher had traced the movement of each planet, they all cried out in one voice that these were the circles I drew to summon Beelzebub. The man who held the book dropped it in terror and unfortunately as it fell it opened at the page on which the action of the magnet is explained; I say unfortunately, because at the place I speak of there is a drawing of this metallic stone where the little bodies which detach themselves from its mass to seize the iron are represented as arms. Hardly had one of these fellows seen it before I heard him roar that this was the toad, they found in the trough in his cousin Fiacre's stable when his horse died. (1:180–83)<sup>12</sup>

The book referred to here as Descartes's *Physics* was his *Principia Philosophiae* from 1644, which deals with the laws of physics. It comprises a series of scientific figures, including one illustrating the orbits of the then-known planets around the sun, as well as the orbits of the moons around some of these planets (Figure 12.2). However, the frightened, illiterate villagers see something entirely different in this figure. Filled with terrifying tales of enchantment, they believe that the planetary orbits in Descartes's book are the "magic circles" necromancers use to summon demons.

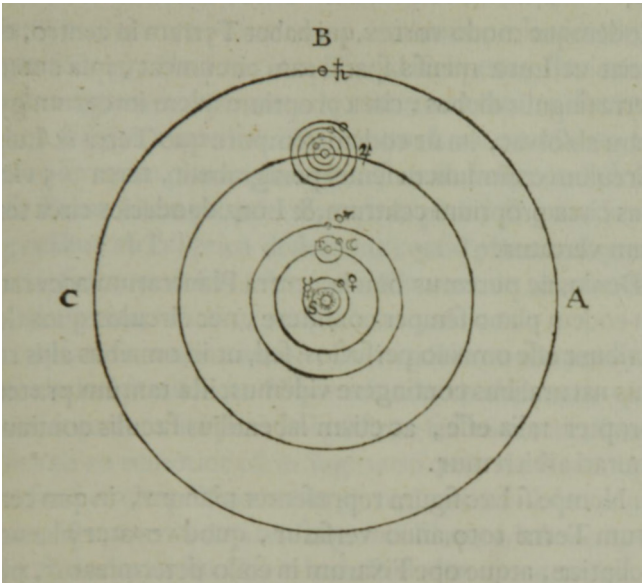


**Figure 12.2.** René Descartes, diagram of planetary orbits, from *Principia Philosophiae* (Amsterdam, 1644). Digitized by Internet Archive from the collections of Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze. Public domain.

As illustrated in Merian the Elder's *Enchantment*, it was believed that magic circles protected necromancers from the demons they summoned, as they, owing to the magical power of the circles, could not enter them (Figure 12.1 above). According to the villagers, Dyrcona even summoned “Beelzebub,” who was the “prince of demons” according to the Gospels (*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* Matt. 12:24, Mark 3:22, Luke 11:15), and responsible for numerous possessions according to later treatises on demonology and records of witch trials (Guiley 26).

The comical absurdity of the villagers' misinterpretations of the scientific figures in Descartes's book on physics is taken to the extreme when one villager mistakes a figure of a magnetic field for a toad he found in his cousin's stable when his horse died (Figure 12.3). The terrified villager apparently assumes that the toad was somehow involved in the death of his cousin's horse, which was a natural assumption given the common association of toads with witchcraft and sorcery in the seventeenth century.

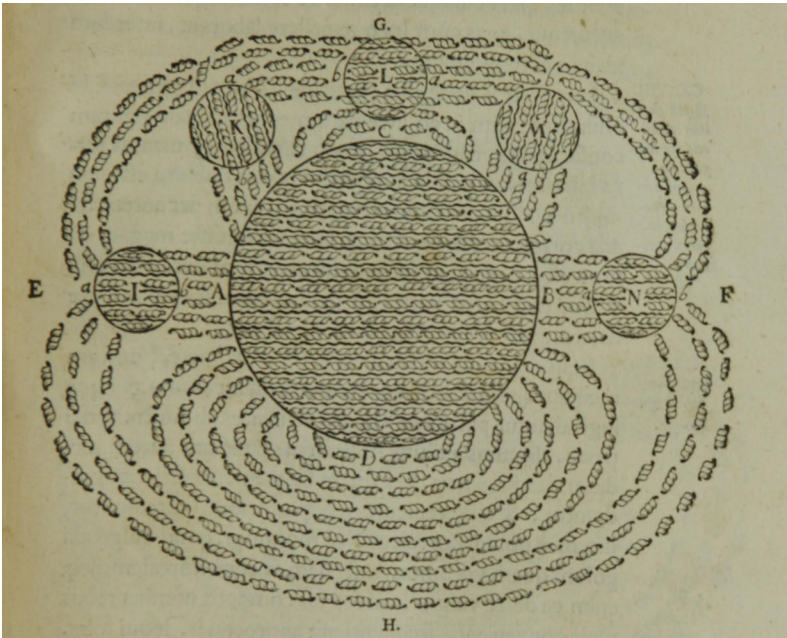


**Figure 12.3.** René Descartes, diagram of magnetic vortices, from *Principia Philosophiae* (Amsterdam, 1644). Digitized by Internet Archive from the collections of Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze. Public domain.

Toads were frequently referred to as witches' "familiar," which were believed to be demons that had taken the form of small animals in order to help witches cause harm to their communities (Parish). In witch trials, the discovery of toads among the belongings of suspected witches was often taken as proof that they were indeed witches (Monter). In a similar way, the villager who has discovered the Cartesian figure in Dyrcona's book is convinced that he has found proof that Dyrcona is indeed a sorcerer, even though he has only found an illustration of a magnetic field.

Of all places, it is in a deeply rationalist book describing a mechanistic world, in which physical bodies obey strict natural laws that render magic impossible, that the superstitious villagers believe they find evidence that Dyrcona is a sorcerer practicing black magic. It could hardly be more ironic. Although Descartes tries to prove the existence of God in the first part of his *Principia*

*Philosophiae*, the physical world he describes in the subsequent three parts is thoroughly disenchanted. It is a world entirely devoid of demons, spirits, witchcraft, magic, and the like. As Alexandre Koyré has put it, *Principia Philosophiae* portrays “a strictly uniform mathematical world” in which “there is nothing [...] but matter and motion” (100–101). Nevertheless, the villagers, who still perceive themselves as porous subjects in an enchanted world, are convinced that the book is about sorcery and magic. They cannot help but see the figures of the new science through the lens of old demonology. The confrontation between the porous subjects in the enchanted world and buffered selves in the disenchanted world could hardly be more explicit and satirical. Realizing that he was living in an age of transition from an enchanted to a disenchanted world view, Cyrano turns one of the great divisions of his era into a satirical critique of the traditional enchanted world view, which he associates with obscurantism and illiteracy, that is, with anything but enlightenment.

### A Clerical Fearmonger

Before Cyrano, other satirists had created binary opposites and pitted them against each other. For example, Erasmus confronted Pope Julius II with St. Peter in *Julius Excluded from Heaven* (1517), which was published anonymously but attributed to Erasmus (Herwaarden 579–85). Rabelais confronted Protestants and Catholics in the fourth book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1552). Cyrano took this satirical device further, confronting not only individuals such as Julius II and Peter, or groups such as Protestants and Catholics, but also world views such as the enchanted and the disenchanted world view.

Furthermore, he refined a character that had already assumed a pivotal role in contemporary religious satire: the deceitful, imposturous priest. This character had often been portrayed as a hypocrite who preached one thing but did another, as he was really driven by avarice and ambition rather than piety and reverence. Molière’s *Tartuffe* is a well-known contemporary example. However, Cyrano expanded the characteristics of this type of character to include not only pretense and greed but also

fearmongering. Cyrano was among the first to describe how clerical leaders deliberately instilled fear in their flocks so that they could more easily direct and manipulate them to their own advantage (Brink 161–80).

As already indicated, the illiterate villagers are not spontaneously convinced that Dyrcona is a dangerous sorcerer and magician. It is only after a parish priest has filled them with “a thousand ridiculous tales” about Dyrcona’s supposed “enchantments” that they come to that conclusion (1:172). Apparently, it is also this priest, named Messire Jean, who persuades them to capture the supposed sorcerer. As Dyrcona recounts, “[s]carcely had I been arrested before I saw Messire Jean appear. He devoutly took his stole and tied it around me, before a crowd of women and children sewed me into a large cloth in spite of my resistance” (1:179).<sup>13</sup> Following this ritual pacification of the alleged sorcerer, Messire Jean deters his followers from laying hands on Dyrcona’s mule by cautioning them that it was “a Satan.” It soon turns out, however, that he has secretly had his servant take the mule home to his own stable:

Messire Jean [...] shouted at the top of his voice that nothing should be touched, that all these books were true grimoires, and that the mule was a Satan. The terrified mob let the mule go in peace. However, I saw Mathurine, the parish priest’s servant, driving it towards the parsonage stable. (1:184)<sup>14</sup>

Like many other clerics exposed in anticlerical satire, Messire Jean is driven by greed. He is eager to obtain the mule, and according to the narrator, his initial motivation for becoming a priest was to obtain “the pilgrim’s money” (1:201).<sup>15</sup> Unlike most of his predecessors, however, Messire Jean satiates his avarice by exploiting the fear and superstition that he himself has instilled in his followers. As porous subjects in an enchanted world, they are susceptible to believe that Dyrcona’s mule is “a Satan,” and as a consequence Messire Jean can make the animal his own without further ado. Everything suggests that Messire Jean does not personally believe in the tales he tells his flock; however, he recounts them anyway for personal gain. In portraying Messire Jean as a cunning fearmonger, Cyrano expands the

satirical tradition of exposing clerical impostors by adding calculated indoctrination and the exploitation of fear to their list of sins.<sup>16</sup>

In the late seventeenth century, clerical leaders were not only exposed as fearmongers in anticlerical satire but also with increasing frequency in philosophical texts. Eight years after the publication of *The State and Empires of the Sun* in 1662, Baruch Spinoza published *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, in which he claims, among many other things, that “fear is the root from which superstition is born, maintained and nourished” and that “nothing governs the multitude as effectively as superstition,” which certain “pastors” have exploited to satisfy their “greed and ambition” (Spinoza 4–7).

We do not know if Spinoza read Cyrano, but the parallels are conspicuous, and in the following decades clerical leaders would be portrayed in similar ways by numerous authors and artists, including John Locke, Balthasar Bekker, Pierre Bayle, Ludvig Holberg, Henry Fielding, William Hogarth, Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Francisco Goya, and many others. In the early Enlightenment, that is, in the age of Cyrano and Spinoza, the clerical fearmonger gradually became a prominent character in anticlerical satire and philosophy, and he remained so throughout the Enlightenment.

## Celestial Thinking

Like humanist authors such as Erasmus and Rabelais, though more radically, Cyrano sought to weaken the traditional Christian culture of fear and its associated processes of subjectivation by means of laughter and ridicule. His novels satirize numerous aspects of Christian belief, not least the notions of demons, spirits, possessions, witchcraft, sorcery, magic, and the like. In his writings, the populace is not open to demonic possession but rather to the influence of clerical leaders who seek to mislead them. In this respect, Cyrano can be considered a libertine, a freethinker, and probably also an atheist. However, the question remains as to whether he can also be regarded as a Cartesian rationalist.

He certainly celebrates the rational and independently thinking individual in contrast to the frightened member of a flock misled



by a scheming pastor. However, there is no certain foundation, no firm ground, no *terra firma* in his world—neither a conceivable rational foundation nor a literal empirical ground. A scene at the opening of the first novel can be interpreted as a parody of the very notion of having firm ground beneath one's feet. It delineates Dyrcona's first unsuccessful attempt at flying to the moon, which results in his arrival at a region referred to as "Nouvelle-France," corresponding to contemporary Canada. Here he is soon presented to the viceroy, whom he tries to convince that since he has completed his long journey in just half a day, "the earth must necessarily have turned during my ascension" just like Copernicus had argued (1:14).<sup>17</sup> In response, the viceroy cautions him against a powerful group of clerical leaders:

Our Jesuit fathers [...] are convinced that you are a magician and the greatest mercy you can obtain from them is to pass for no more than an impostor. And, after all, the movement you attribute to the earth, isn't it a neat paradox? [...] What is the probability that the sun is motionless when we see it move and that the earth turns on its axis with such rapidity when we feel it firm beneath us? (1:15–16)<sup>18</sup>

Traditional earthbound common sense, exemplified here by the viceroy, struggles to detach itself from its terrestrial perspective and imagine a view from space that would enable it to observe planet earth revolving around its own axis. In contrast, the not-so-earthbound rationality or the flighty, imaginative thinking that Dyrcona represents is aware of the impossibility of finding firm, immovable ground under one's feet. Within the fictional universe of *Cyrano*, the notion of a stable foundation is absent, be it in the form of a fixed earth nor in the form of a logical mainland. In a world where the earth is in constant motion, revolving around its own axis, the very concept of a *terra firma* is a figment of the imagination. Consequently, the notion of *terra firma* is *also* misleading as a metaphor for the inner stability and certainty of the subject, which Descartes believed to have found in the principle *cogito ergo sum*, that is, "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes 1:221).

In several works, including *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes famously doubted everything and in doing so discovered that he could not doubt that he doubted. *Something* doubted, and that



something had to be himself. Therefore, he had to exist (Descartes 1:219–23). Descartes thus believed he had discovered a new foundation of certain knowledge in the self-reflective subject. This is also how Hegel saw his achievement. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel wrote that with Descartes “we are at home and can shout ‘Land’ like the sailor after a long journey on a turbulent sea” (20:120).<sup>19</sup> To Hegel, Descartes was “the true initiator of modern philosophy” and the Cartesian subject was the terra firma of this philosophy (20:123).<sup>20</sup> According to Hegel, we are “at home” in this philosophical tradition, because it is based on “a new ground” that is logical rather than theological, grounded in the self-perception of the subject rather than in the divinity of a supreme being (20:123).<sup>21</sup>

More recently, Peter Sloterdijk has characterized the modern philosophical tradition initiated by Descartes as “terran thought,” which seeks to uncover “an inner basis of certainty which, as one says, can be taken as a ‘point of departure’” (139).<sup>22</sup> According to Sloterdijk, “terran” thinkers, ranging from Descartes to Husserl, have attempted “to lay an unshakeable logical mainland under our feet,” while “maritime” thinkers, ranging from merchants of the seventeenth century to Nietzsche, have navigated moving surfaces in the awareness that running aground can be fatal (139).<sup>23</sup>

With Cyrano in mind, however, we can argue that maritime thought is not the only alternative to terran thought. Perhaps the kind of reasoning that Cyrano introduces could be labeled as celestial thought. As with terran and maritime thinking, celestial thinking began to flourish in the early modern period, driven in large part by fictional accounts of lunar voyages. Notable examples of this genre were Johannes Kepler’s *Somnium* (1638), Francis Godwin’s *The Man on the Moone* (1638), and Cyrano’s *The Other World*, which was probably written in the 1640s and circulated in manuscript form as part of the clandestine literature of the period (Sankey 42).

In contrast to terran thinkers, who seek to establish firm foundations for their logical constructions, celestial thinkers are oriented toward the possibility of other worlds in the vast, unexplored universe. In contrast to maritime thinkers, who are concerned with navigating movable surfaces without running aground, celestial

thinkers imagine how the familiar world might appear from great distances, that is, in a celestial perspective. By cultivating flights of imagination, they enable a radically different perspective on our cosmologically insignificant planet and its inhabitants.

In this manner, the celestial thinkers of early modern Europe adopted and modernized a perspective that had been a key feature in the ancient tradition of Menippean satire. In Lucian's story *Icaromenippus, or the Sky-Man*, for example, Menippus recounts visiting the moon, from where the inhabitants of the earth looked like a busy "swarm of ants" discussing "affairs of state" while pretending to be "builders, politicians, aldermen, musicians, and philosophers" (Lucian 2:301). In this way, the human tendency to self-importance is subverted by the Menippean—or celestial—perspective, which makes the inhabitants of the earth appear as insignificant ants.

In a similar vein, the writings of the early modern celestial thinkers contained a dangerous potential to subvert the long-standing geocentric and anthropocentric world order. For centuries, this world order had fixed the earth and its inhabitants at the center of God's creation and care. However, when observed from the moon, earth does not appear as an immovable, stable ground at the center of the universe. Instead, it manifests as an eccentric planet in motion, akin to how the moon appears from earth's perspective. As mentioned earlier, the church fought such views with violence and force. Nevertheless, ideas of other inhabited planets moving in an infinite, centerless universe were further refined and elaborated in clandestine works of celestial thinkers such as Cyrano.

## Conclusion

Cyrano de Bergerac's *The Other World* offers a bold satirical intervention in the early modern processes of subjectivation, targeting both the Christian conception of a porous subject in an enchanted world, and the rationalist conception—epitomized by Descartes—of a foundational, stable subject. Instead of subscribing to one of these contemporary theories of the subject, Cyrano endeavors to liberate himself from all fear-inspiring and thought-inhibiting forms of subjectivity.

With its satirical critique of theological demonology and clerical fearmongering, Cyrano's fiction can be seen as an early example of the broader intellectual movement of the early Enlightenment. However, it can also be viewed as an imaginative rather than rational—or as a celestial rather than terran—alternative to the prevailing way of thinking. Owing to its satirical subversion of the Cartesian notion of a firm foundation of all thought, it can be regarded as a precursor to a modern way of thinking that treats any form of foundational metaphysics with irony.

While scientific investigation and rationalist philosophy have been instrumental in dispelling antiquated superstitions and religious beliefs, these new disciplines are not without inherent limitations and a certain degree of naivety. By ridiculing both the Christian culture of fear and the metaphysical ambitions of rationalist philosophy, Cyrano's *The Other World* introduces a radical, destabilizing form of fiction that deflates the illusions of certainty—whether theological or philosophical—while insisting on the liberating potential of imaginative detachment.

## Endnotes

1. Until recently, Jacob Sprenger was often listed as coauthor of the *Hammer of Witches*, but his involvement in writing the treatise is generally rejected in recent research (Simek 259–60).
2. If not indicated otherwise all translations are my own.
3. “erleugnet Gott und sich ergeben dem Sathan.”
4. “ein großer Zaubergarten.”
5. “die Entzauerung der Welt [...] geheimnisvollen unberechenbaren Mächte.”
6. “Non, je ne crois point de sorciers, encore que plusieurs grands personnages n'aient pas été de mon avis, et je ne défère à l'autorité de personne, si elle n'est accompagnée de raison [...] la raison seule est ma reine.”
7. “barbes à longue robe.”
8. “aucune Parlement [...] se connaisse en sorciers comme le nôtre.”
9. “de le faire brûler sans scandale.”

10. “Le sorcier que nous accusons est l’auteur des Etats et Empires de la Lune; il ne saurait pas nier qu’il ne soit le plus grand magicien de l’Europe, après ce qu’il avoue lui-même. Comment! avoir monté à la lune! Cela se peut-il sans l’entremise de... Je n’oserais nommer la Bête; car enfin, dites-moi, qu’allait-il faire chez la lune?” Belle demande! Interrompt un autre. Il allait assister au sabbat qui s’y tenait possible ce jour-là.”

11. “mille contes ridicules de mes enchantements.”

12. “Le premier volume qu’ils ouvrirent s’étant rencontré la Physique de M. Descartes, quand ils aperçurent tous les cercles par lesquels ce philosophe a distingué le mouvement de chaque planète, tous d’une voix hurlèrent que c’étaient les cernes que je traçais pour appeler Belzébuth. Celui qui le tenait le laissa choir d’appréhension, et par malheur en tombant il s’ouvrit dans une page où sont expliquées les vertus de l’aimant; je dis par malheur, pour ce qu’à l’endroit dont je parle il y a une figure de cette pierre métallique, où les petits corps qui se déprennent de sa masse pour accrocher le fer sont représentés comme des bras. A peine un de ces marauds l’aperçut, que je l’entendis s’égosiller que c’était là le crapaud qu’on avait trouvé dans l’auge de l’écurie de son cousin Fiacre, quand ses chevaux moururent.”

13. “J’étais à peine arrêté, que je vis paraître messire Jean, lequel tira dévotement son étole dont il me garrotta; et ensuite une cohue de femmes et d’enfants, qui malgré toute ma résistance me cousirent dans une grande nappe.”

14. “Messire Jean [...] criait, à gorge déployée, qu’on se gardât de toucher à rien, que tous ces livres-là étaient de francs grimoires, et le mulot un Satan. La canaille ainsi épouvantée laissa partir le mulot en paix. Je vis pourtant Mathurine, la servante de monsieur le curé, qui le chassait vers l’étable du presbytère.”

15. “l’argent de pèlerins.”

16. Cyrano expands on this portrait in a satirical letter addressed to Messire Jean (*Œuvres* 2:176–78).

17. “il fallait que la terre eût tourné pendant mon élévation.”

18. “Nos pères jésuites [...] veulent absolument que vous soyes magicien; et la plus grande grâce que vous puissiez obtenir d’eux, c’est de ne passer que pour imposteur. Et en vérité, ce mouvement que vous attribuez à la terre, n’est-ce point un beau paradoxe? [...]

Et puis quelles grandes vraisemblances avez-vous pour vous figurer que le soleil soit immobile, quand nous le voyons marcher? et que la terre tourne autour de son centre avec tant de rapidité, quand nous la sentons ferme dessous nous?.”

19. “sind wir zu Hause und können wie der Schiffer nach langer Umherfahrt auf der ungestümen.”

20. “der wahrhafte Anfänger der modernen Philosophie.”

21. “ein neuer Boden.”

22. “in Innengrund von Gewißheit offengelegt, von dem nun, wie es heißt,” “ausgegangen werden kann.”

23. “ein unerschütterliches logisches Festland unter die Füße zu legen.”

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# 13. Rousseau's Antihumanism: Reading *Julie* as Negative Anthropology

Sophie Bäärnhielm Pousette

## Summary

Although it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, or, The New Heloise*, that earned him most prominence in his own time, it is far less read today than his political work. Yet the last decades have seen new attempts to resituate this fictional work at the very core of Rousseau's social and political thought. Analyzing the novel, Étienne Balibar muses on the possibility of finding, in the relation between the protagonist Saint-Preux and his Julie, an actualization of Jacques Derrida's *aimance*, before contending that the novel's tearful ending offers a critique of its own utopian community as well as the collective subject painted in *The Social Contract*. For Slavoj Žižek, the tragic end illustrates the difference between the false transparency of the novel's "community of hearts" and the radically new form of social relation emerging in the October revolution. Is *Julie*, then, a critique of love, or could it serve to imagine love as critique? This chapter explores this question by taking its point of departure in Michel Foucault's conception of critique.

## Introduction

In what sense must anthropology always imply a certain notion of critique? We find Foucault give a tentative answer to this question in *La Question Anthropologique* (The Anthropological Question), a course he delivered at *École normale supérieure* during the winter and spring of 1954–1955, which considers, among other things, anthropology as a realization of critique (83).

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Traditionally, Foucault suggests, we may conceive of critique as such in two distinct ways, either in terms of a moral or political critique, which always relies on a certain postulate of human nature, such as the Christian critique of fallen nature, or the humanist critique that speaks of forgotten nature. In both of these cases, critique represents a path of return, but a return that also is in part a promise of transfiguration. Alternatively, we have what he terms a “philosophical critique (*critique philosophique*),” which attempts to determine the a priori conditions of knowledge, and thus present us with the ultimate foundation from where nature might be thought (Foucault 110). After the intervention of Immanuel Kant, we may, however, no longer distinguish these two senses, and our task has become one of realizing critique as a critique of man insofar as he is the basis for critique (Foucault 110). This task is, in Foucault’s view, one that history has passed down to Marxist philosophy. In what follows, I will nevertheless consider whether attempts to undertake this task predates Marx, as well as Kant.

### Rousseau’s Critical Philosophy?

Traditionally, Jean-Jacques Rousseau has been regarded as representative of the critical position Foucault refers to as “the path of return (*chemin du retour*)”. Indeed, later in the same lecture as quoted above, Foucault will compare Rousseau’s nostalgic longing for nature, as for a lost Fatherland, with the radical gesture of Nietzsche, whose relentless critique rather prompts a return to hitherto unknown territory, to the clear detriment of the former (178).

Considering that it was Rousseau’s dismissal of the doctrine of sin (i.e., the Christian view of man as fallen) that caused his excommunication, and subsequent exilic wanderings, it is undoubtedly tempting to identify his defense of human nature—as we read in *Emile*, “[t]here is no original perversity in the human heart” (92; Book 2)—as synonymous to what Foucault above addresses in terms of a humanist critique directed at our forgotten nature.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this is the direction that seems to be anticipated in the quote from Aristotle’s *Politics*, chosen as an epigraph to the *Second Discourse*, which reads, “Not in depraved things but in

those well oriented according to nature, are we to consider what is natural" (Rousseau, *Basic* 23).<sup>2</sup>

For a certain number of influential interpreters, Rousseau nevertheless differs from his fellow *Philosophes* in their praises of man, to the degree that he appreciates not only that humans have merely forgotten nature but that human nature as such has undergone irreversible changes during the course of history. If, as Ernst Cassirer famously suggested in his 1954 study, Rousseau's lasting contribution to Western thought resides in him rendering the doctrine of sin sociohistorical, turning the theodicy into an anthropodicy by displacing the question of ultimate responsibility (76–77), many are still convinced that his thought nevertheless remains overdetermined by the fundamental conflict introduced through man's "fall" into society. We find, to name only one example, that Judith Shklar concludes her influential study of Rousseau by stating that the truth he felt bound to disclose to his readers was "that they were not and would never become either men or citizens" (214).

In what follows, I will attempt to go beyond this verdict, demonstrating why Rousseau's thought is far from a humanist longing for forgotten nature, nor ultimately a secular rendering of us being fallen, which renders permanent the conflict between natural man and man of and in society. Assuming the intimate relation of critique and the question of human nature, what Foucault names "the anthropological question," I will suggest that Rousseau's thought gains its value as a critique precisely insofar as we might interpret it as a *negative anthropology*.

## The First Sense of Negative Anthropology

What is meant by negative anthropology? Initially, we may understand it to point toward what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe judges to be a critical element of Rousseau's thought. In *Poetics of History: Rousseau and the Theater of Originary Mimesis*, he suggests that:

What Rousseau discovers or invents is the transcendental as negativity itself, or, if you prefer, transcendental negativity [...]. The nature of man is not to have a nature. [This is] the weak version of

the transcendental, which will remain—inevitably—the major theorem of the “doctrine”: man is absolutely distinguished from animals by these two original qualities [...] freedom and perfectibility. (29)<sup>3</sup>

At the outset, we can observe that Rousseau’s theory of man, what I will tentatively refer to as his “anthropology,” is described here as “negative” in the sense of lacking more than a minimal content, reducible to the two characteristics that distinguish humans from beasts: freedom and perfectibility. Without being able to consider in depth the highly sophisticated way in which Lacoue-Labarthe develops this theme in relation to the human being as mimetic being, “originarily, an actor” (35),<sup>4</sup> I will utilize his phrasing to define the content of the “postulate of human nature” Rousseau is said to prompt a return to, according to Foucault’s suggestion (110). Immediately, the notion of “transcendental negativity” seems to be at odds with any simple “return to nature,” whether Christian or humanist. That is, unless we suppose that the “return” operative within the two examples given (again, humanist and Christian) could be viewed as a return to the immediate awareness of a primordial lack constitutive of human nature as such.

Incidentally, it is not infrequent that we encounter this very definition in attempts to explicate the proper meaning of the Christian doctrine of original sin. At the beginning of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, where we encounter what is probably one of the most reproduced and authoritative attempts to get to the bottom of the human condition, we are confronted with a most immediate and yet exhaustive explanation of our wicked state. “You have made us for yourself,” and hence, “our heart is restless until it rests in you” (3; I,1).<sup>5</sup> As Hannah Arendt would state in her dissertation on the concept of love in Augustine, we find here an acknowledgment that God is at once “the Supreme Being and [...] man’s own proper being,” apart from whom he is a helpless slave to vice and sin (86).<sup>6</sup> In Arendt’s dissection of Augustine we find her insisting that Augustine’s theological anthropology not merely determines that Man – insofar as he is created – is neither independent nor self-sufficient (20), but also that this amounts to him loving himself properly only by despising what he is apart from God. True self-love thus, paradoxically, coincides with self-hatred (27).

This is not the place to critically assess Arendt's analysis of Augustine, but what can be said is that the Augustine she describes is not a far cry from the Augustine whose authority Rousseau questioned in the letter he wrote to the Archbishop of Paris, Christophe de Beaumont, following the latter's pastoral letter, which condemned the unorthodoxy of *Emile*. It is, writes Rousseau here, mad to hold that the creature supposedly absolved from sin through the sacrifice of Christ and baptism in his name is nevertheless still entirely under the dominance of original sin. Equally absurd is it to insist that this same man, although he supposedly sins out of necessity, being caught in the thralls of original sin, still holds full responsibility for his crimes, and should be called "evil" (Rousseau, "Letter to Beaumont" 30). It is, he states: "[N]ot at all certain, in my view, that this doctrine of original sin, subject as it is to such terrible difficulties, is contained in the Scriptures either as clearly or as harshly as it has pleased the Rhetorician Augustine and our Theologians to construct it" (29).<sup>7</sup>

Without neglecting the apparent ills and evils of society, Rousseau nevertheless insists, here as in the *Discourses*, that the fault lies with viewing this evil as inherent, rather than accumulated. As he states in the first sentence of *Emile*: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man" (37; Book 1).<sup>8</sup> Man is born good and deteriorates in the company of other men. Similarly, we read in the first chapter of the first book of *The Social Contract*, that "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau, *Basic* 141; Book 1: Ch. 1).<sup>9</sup> Prior to becoming a slave through his dependence on other men and on things, it appears as if man would enjoy that sufficiency in himself that Augustine, the rhetorician, seemingly denies. Indeed, when we read Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, the sin of history appears to be to force humans out of this state of sufficiency and place them in the hands of others, rendering them "insufficient" by positing them in a state defined by lack and artificial desires.

Nevertheless, Rousseau does not, in the face of this, request that we return to that state of sufficiency distinctive of our state in nature. And this owes to the fact that what he perceives to be freedom properly speaking, namely the virtuous exercise of

one's will, is dependent on morality, which we gain in society, as reason informs our natural sentiments. As he states in *Emile*, "in the republic all of the advantages of the natural state would be united with those of the civil state, and freedom which keeps man exempt from vices would be joined to morality which raises him to virtue" (85; Book 2).<sup>10</sup> In *The Social Contract*, it is furthermore determined that it is "the acquisition in the civil state of moral liberty, which alone makes man truly the master of himself. For to be driven by appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is liberty" (Rousseau, *Basic* 151; Book 1: Ch. 8).<sup>11</sup> Virtue is, in other words, a property of culture, rather than nature, and freedom resides precisely in the virtuous disposition that allows humans to master their passions. In other words, we happen upon the paradoxical insight that the freedom humans are born into is not fully part and parcel of human nature.

Here arises what many take to be the supposed insurmountable contradiction of Rousseau's thought, namely that he never ceases to herald natural self-sufficiency, speaking against the sort of dependence that forms among men in society, and simultaneously insists that virtue and freedom proper are properties of political society and can only flourish on the condition of a mutual dependence. As the famous phrase of *The Social Contract* goes, the Legislator must be capable of remolding the nature of humans, which consists precisely in drawing dependency as far as it could possibly go, to negate our natural state of self-sufficiency as far as humanly possible.

He who dares to undertake the establishment of a people should feel that he is, so to speak, in a position to change human nature, to transform each individual (who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole) into a part of a larger whole from which this individual receives, in a sense, his life and his being; to alter man's constitution in order to strengthen it. (Rousseau, *Basic* 163; Book 2, Ch. VII)<sup>12</sup>

The task of the Legislator is to make men truly free, through providing the conditions for the reign of virtue. If this striving was not original to Rousseau (we only need to think of Plato's *Republic*) he has nevertheless been remembered as the patron saint of the "cult of virtue" that informed the purgatory rule of Robespierre. Somewhat ironically, it is the degree to which

Rousseau's literary writings seemingly attest to him having remained aware of the limitations of virtue that he is acquitted from the responsibility for the Terror. What, then, do they tell us about his views on human nature?

### The New Heloise: The Eternal Struggle between Virtue and Passion

If, today, we foremost consider Rousseau as the author of the political manual of the French Revolution, it was, during his own life, the love novel *Julie or the New Heloise*, first published in 1761, that reached most readers. Let us remind ourselves of the plot.

A man without means or title, Saint-Preux, is arranged to tutor the young noblewoman Julie. They fall in love. Their differing social statuses will not allow their union. The lovers are separated. After several years, Julie invites Saint-Preux to her idyllic rural community, under the pretext of educating her children. In fact, it is her husband, Monsieur de Wolmar, the "invisible hand" guiding, and "living eye" monitoring, the community that has arranged for the former lovers to reunite, in order to cure them from their infatuation. Their attempts to repress their old love reaches a tragic end when she sacrifices herself, formally to save her children, the real reason revealed as being her undying love for Saint-Preux. The idyllic community is left in ruins, as passion triumphs over virtue.

For a long time *Julie* suffered from that "division of labor" that defines many commentaries on Rousseau, which tend to consider the literary and political writings in strict isolation from each other, but the last century has seen several attempts to allow the novel to shed new light on Rousseau's political thoughts. One of the most intriguing recent readings of the novel that pays special attention to the question of nature is found in an essay by Étienne Balibar, titled "*Aimances* in Rousseau: *Julie or the New Heloise* as Treatise on the Passions."<sup>13</sup>

Balibar's entry point is, as the occasion motivated, Paul de Man's dealings with Rousseau, and in particular his critical engagement with another influential French commentator, Louis Althusser, whose verdict on *Julie* was delivered indirectly, in his drastic statement that the numerous discrepancies that haunt *The*

*Social Contract* demands a flight into literature, “the alternative to theory,” which, we must assume, ultimately evacuate the proper political element (160).

Against this verdict, we find de Man’s insisting that, “far from being a repression of the political, as Althusser would have it, literature is condemned to being the truly political mode of discourse” (157). This is affirmed in Balibar’s discussion of de Man’s interpretation, in which he suggests that the novel *Julie*, precisely through its ambivalent ending, could be seen to “incorporate [...] an internal critique of its own utopia” (102). If *Julie* nominally is the work where Rousseau seeks to paint a picture of the reign of virtue, depicting a community where the general interest, that is, virtue, has superseded particular interests, that is, amorous passions, the end must disclose the inherent limits to virtuous generalization. Insofar as passion ultimately conquers virtue, we might, Balibar suggests, view *Julie* as an exploration of the ultimate limits of the “subjective unity of the community” that Rousseau seeks to establish, whereby it would emerge within the totality of Rousseau’s work as an internal critique of his own political project (105). This reading mirrors the one suggested by Jean Starobinski, who nevertheless insists that Rousseau, incapable of admitting the limit he himself has disclosed, must have recourse to a redemption through religious exaltation, preferring in the end “personal salvation to the absolute of the community,” on the basis of the two of them being irreconcilable (121).

A final, and arguably more tendentious, reading of the novel is offered by Slavoj Žižek, in *Living in the End Times*. Are we, he asks here, really to understand the tragic ending of *Julie* as a negative verdict on the possibility of transforming, or sublating, erotic love into virtuous order, that is, reconciling duty with inclination (111–12)? Or does the failure rather stem from the fact that the utopia of Clarens is merely illusory, that it is really “the realisation of a fantasy proper to the despotic pre-revolutionary Enlightenment” (113). According to Žižek it does indeed, the reason being the fact that the “‘general will’ that appears to emerge in Clarens deprives the subjects of the very core of their subjectivity” (113–14). Against the despotic rule of the Master’s discourse, “Julie’s ‘irrational’ resistance is the proof, a desperate

attempt to reassert the infinite right of her subjectivity" (114). Contrary to the majority of the commenters previously mentioned (de Man possibly excluded), Žižek does not regard this as a refutation of Rousseau's political commitment to a society of the general will, *per se*. Rather, he insists that we have examples where social and civic duty and individual passion has been harmonized, stating, unsurprisingly, the Bolsheviks as an instructive example (114).

One does not have to agree with the last assertion in order to acknowledge that Žižek's reading captures a dimension of Rousseau that the other interpreters (possibly excluding de Man) overlooked, namely the idea that the "social relation" that reconciles passionate attachment and virtuous affection emerges itself as the intentional object that serves as the mediation of individual desires and volitions. In other words, insofar as Rousseau's literary and political writings seem to rely on what Balibar, in a gesture at Derrida, refers to as the "transcendental supplement," which alternately take the form of a Legislator, a "living eye," and the tutor of *Emile*, it is only because they fail to write forth the objective mediation that he himself identifies as the condition of possibility for a society to endure. A mediation we, as Žižek points out, foremost know under the name of "the general will" (113–14).

In what follows, it will be suggested that Rousseau's writings, and possibly *Julie* to a higher degree than any other, enables us to see that the "social relation" of his "unattainable" philosophical goal, must be considered in unison with what I, drawing again from the suggestion of Lacoue-Labarthe, would like to name the specific content of his "negative anthropology." If Rousseau's works seems to belie his own political vision, it is, I will propose, not because he must admit the limits that human nature itself poses to his, allegedly, utopian thinking but because he himself does not go far enough in pursuing his own assertion in *Emile*, that "[w]e do not know what our nature permits us to be" (62; Book 1).<sup>14</sup> In short, I will suggest that his critique follows more closely in the steps of the Foucauldian redefinition of critique than Foucault himself would have acknowledged.

As we saw above, the conflict at the heart of *Julie* is often described as the eternal strife between virtue and passion. Considering



the novel as one manifestation of Rousseau's thought in general, we could, again, as suggested above, translate this into the tension between individual and general interest that many commentators judge to be the enduring obstacle to Rousseau's political imaginary. It is the curse of our current state that we cannot return to the state of nature, prior to the rise of illusory passions, nor should we fool ourselves that we may find enduring ways to tame these passions in the interest of the common will. What Balibar refers to as the "heterogeneity of the fundamental passions" (105) will always counter every attempt at this. But is the true obstacle our first or our second nature, the desires we have acquired or the ones we cannot dispose of?

What is evident is that those desires immediately related to our self-preservation are harder to deal with in an exclusively critical manner. At least, this would seem to be the case for Rousseau himself. Turning to *The Social Contract*, Rousseau, having stated that the general will always serves the interest of the contractors, nevertheless acknowledges that the enduring interest man has *as man*, rather than *as citizen*, that is, his particular interest, always poses a threat to this allegiance to the general will (*Basic* 150; Book I, Ch. VII; 192; Book III, Ch. X). In her rather merciless dealing with Rousseau in *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt goes as far as to state that the general will itself emerges from this conflict within the heart of each citizen, suggesting, in other words, that we only can conceive of a general interest insofar as it is erected in diametric and enduring opposition to the particular ones of each citizen (78). Virtue, states Arendt further, "has indeed been equated with selflessness ever since Robespierre preached a virtue that was borrowed from Rousseau" (79). The step from Rousseau to Stalin never seemed smaller.

This verdict returns in many commentaries, albeit in less drastic formulations. It would not be too daring to state that, for many, it speaks the truth of Rousseau's views on mankind. But does it, in fact, speak the truth of mankind, in his own view? The second preface of *Julie* will allow me to suggest otherwise, and to further develop the relationship between critique and what I tentatively have referred to as Rousseau's negative anthropology.

## An Estate to Love: The Object of Inquiry

The second preface to *Julie* takes the form of a dialogue between R—Rousseau himself, we assume—and N, the editor. It is stated in a “Notice” anticipating it that it was intended to serve as the original preface, but held back due to its length, as well as a fear that it would have a negative impact on the reception (Rousseau, *Julie* 5).

The dialogue mainly concerns the status of fiction in the novel. Is it, or is it not, a real depiction of actual people, asks the editor? Responding to R’s question why it matters in the case of a novel, he states that: “It matters a great deal for this one. A Portrait always has some value provided it is a good likeness, however strange the Original. But in a Tableau based on imagination, each human figure must possess features common to mankind, or else the Tableau is worthless” (*Julie* 7).<sup>15</sup>

The tale of the two lovers is so unlike anything found elsewhere, and so unrealistic, that unless it relies on actual events it is far too foreign from mankind: “[T]he characters are people from the other world” (Rousseau, *Julie* 7).<sup>16</sup>

Responding to the editor’s unwillingness to accept the depiction of virtue given in the novel (as fictional rather than factual) Rousseau states that “[i]t is the Preachers’ job to exhort us with Be good, be virtuous, without much concern for the results of their sermons; the citizen who is concerned about them should not foolishly exhort us with Be good; but make us love the estate that helps us do so” (*Julie* 15).<sup>17</sup>

Let us not then judge as unbelievable those depictions of virtue that have not yet any model in our world, but ask what estate that enabled them to develop within the fictional one. Let us not assume as natural those vices we encounter in society at present, but consider whence they emerged. This insistence, which initiates the *Second Discourse*, applies in particular to Rousseau’s analysis of the difference between natural love for oneself, *amour-de-soi*, and other regarding vanity, *amour-propre*, which has successively rendered men more and more incapable of separating true need from mere whim. Love for oneself, or *amour-de-soi*, “which regards only ourselves, is contented when our true needs are satisfied. But *amour-propre* which makes comparisons, is never content and never could be, because this sentiment, preferring

ourselves to others, also demands others to prefer us to themselves" (Rousseau, *Emile* 213–14; Book 4).<sup>18</sup>

As many commentators acknowledge, the conceptual apparatuses Rousseau utilizes in establishing the distinction between natural and socialized self-love were deeply embedded in French moral discourses that wore the imprint of the theological or, rather, Augustinian tradition (Keohane; Riley). Within this tradition, the way to determine the moral value of love was foremost a matter of the object in question. Proper love was, as Augustine had written in *City of God*, directed at God, to the dismissal of self, and improper love was love of one's self to the detriment of God (593; XIV, 28). For the branch of French Augustinians referred to as the Jansenists, owing to their allegiance to the writings of Dutch theologian Cornelius Jansen, and among whose followers we retrieve philosopher Blaise Pascal, it was assumed that man, in his fallen state, was utterly incapable of loving properly, being entirely dominated by the rule of sinful *amour-propre* (Keohane 286–306).

As we have seen above, it is not uncommon among interpreters to speak of Rousseau's philosophy as a sociohistorical rendering of the traditional doctrine of original sin. As we find Mark Hulliung putting it, "Rousseau was [...] the man who offered a mirror image of Pascal from within the philosophy of the Enlightenment," by maintaining that we ought to distinguish the dominant form of self-love within society from an authentic kind, rather than to herald self-interest as virtuous in itself (35). Against the Pascalian, or Jansenist, proposition that humans are incapable of loving differently owing to original sin, Rousseau nevertheless insists on the real difference between two forms of self-love, and the need to distinguish one from another. As he writes in *Emile*, "[i]t is believed that man has an intense love for his own preservation, and that is true. But it is not seen that this love, in the way in which we feel it, is in large part the work of men" (82; Book 2).<sup>19</sup> In *The Social Contract* we find this observation transposed to the political register, as Rousseau states that "the populace always wants the good, but by itself it does not always see it" (*Basic* 162; Book 2, Ch. VI).<sup>20</sup>

This is, arguably, the dimension that Althusser seems to pass over too quickly, in proclaiming that the formation of the general will

presupposes a general interest that would need to precede the general will itself to begin with (151). Regardless of whether it might seem contrary to one's interest to give up one's particular interest, we must acknowledge that Rousseau's distinction between true and apparent interests largely parallel the separation that he has inherited from the theological discussion, and which ultimately establishes a difference between self-love on the basis of the object of concern. With Rousseau, we merely find Augustine's distinction transferred to the political register, and combined with his views on freedom as a property of society, and our true interest as aligned with the interest of this society. It is only insofar as the citizen is initially unwilling to, or incapable of, realizing this fact that he must be "forced to be free" as he writes in *The Social Contract* (*Basic* 150; Book I, Ch. VII)<sup>21</sup>—a statement that echoes in so many interpreters' views of Rousseau as a precursor of the rule of Terror, not least Arendt's. What these readings presuppose is that whatever interest that precedes the general will, (nourished by the general interest), is (1) authentic and (2) constituted in freedom, in which case the rule of the general will would amount to the exercise of brute force. The question is: Is this Rousseau's own conviction?

Certain assertions would point in this direction. In the chapter of *The Social Contract* titled "On the Death of the Body Politic," Rousseau meditates on the fragility of even the finest states:

If Sparta and Rome perished, what state can hope to last forever? If we wish to form a durable establishment, let us then not dream of making it eternal. To succeed, one must not attempt the impossible or flatter oneself with giving to the work of men a solidity that things human do not allow. (*Basic* 194; Book III, Ch. XI)<sup>22</sup>

Here, Rousseau seemingly affirms that human nature puts a limit to what mankind can achieve, with regard to political art. A similar statement is made in the previous chapter, "On the Abuse of Government and Its Tendency to Degenerate," where he asserts that "just as the private will acts constantly against the general will, so the government makes a continual effort against sovereignty," and that this is "the inherent and inevitable vice which, from the birth of the body politic, tends unceasingly to destroy it" (*Basic* 192; Book III, Ch. X).<sup>23</sup>

It is crucial to underline that he initiates this meditation with Sparta and Rome, since other writings suggest that addressing residual self-interest is by the way of transforming it into a patriotic fervor. We find the most illuminating example in the writing on Poland, where Rousseau muses on the possibility of political education to utilize *amour-propre* in the service of the *patrie*. The possibilities of a “redemptive” *amour-propre* is also at the center in the recent work of a number of Rousseau scholars, including Timothy O’Hagan, Nicholas Dent, and most recently Frederick Neuhouser, whose *Rousseau’s Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* provides an especially ambitious attempt to discover the constructive possibilities of *amour-propre*. As the title discloses, Neuhouser proposes that Rousseau’s theory of *amour-propre* represents the first appearance of a developed notion of recognition, antedating the one of Hegel.

In *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of Human Ideas*,<sup>24</sup> Axel Honneth questions this idea, and, interestingly, he does so on the basis of Rousseau’s relationship to the writers we usually think of as the French moralists (most importantly La Rochefoucauld), who, even in those cases that they were not formally writing out of a theological conviction, nevertheless shared the basic assumptions of the French Augustinianism which held humans to be estranged from themselves. Instead of viewing Rousseau’s thought as anticipating Hegel’s philosophy of recognition, we should, Honneth insists, identify him as giving a philosophical account of what we may instead refer to as an account of “negative recognition,” by which Honneth attempts to give a name to Rousseau’s anthropological rendering of the epistemic uncertainty informing the French moralists (28–47). Moreover, he suggests that this “negative theory of recognition,” that is, a secular Augustinianism, is evident in the work of French philosophers up until our day, including thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser (47–53).

Unfortunately, it lies outside the scope of this chapter to develop this last, incredibly intriguing, suggestion, though it could undoubtedly cast new light on the engagements of French theorists with Rousseau’s writings discussed above. Refraining from this, we can only remark on the fact that Honneth’s intervention

offers a notion of "negative anthropology,"<sup>25</sup> which is quite different from the one made by Lacoue-Labarthe. This "Augustinian anthropology" is not negative in the sense of abstaining from determining the nature of man but insofar as it posits conflict at the core of his very existence.

One might take the ending of *Emile*, or *Julie*, as examples in favor of Honneth's analysis. Nevertheless, one could equally well insist that if we consider seriously the content of the second preface to *Julie*, the major idea of which echoes throughout Rousseau's writings, we have reason to doubt that this is truly his "negative anthropology." If society is fragile, it is not so because of the nature of man but because of the failure of the state. Insofar as freedom, understood as the capacity to act virtuously, is made possible through the estate in which we participate, and it is in society we gain a capacity to do as we please, is it not in reference to our specific society that we must disclose the limits to our constitution? Is it not solely with reference to the social totality that we may retrieve what Žižek refers to as "the very core of our subjectivity"? What could this "core of our subjectivity" consist of, if freedom and perfectibility, the two properties that characterize mankind, only emerge in the creation of a social object?

The question that must be posed to those who speak of individual volition or interest prior to the coming into being of the social interest is: What may we say about freedom and authentic interest, prior to us having been made able to develop it in our estate? What subject, and what nature, is there to speak of before society has allowed us to become what we were born to be, namely, free?

One thing is certain, as de Man acknowledges. After we have left the state of nature, it would be absurd to believe that humans serve their interest by trying to maintain that state of independence that was their original one. "By leaving the state of nature, we force our fellows to leave it, too. No one can remain in it in spite of the others, and it would really be leaving it to want to remain when it is impossible to live there, for the first law of nature is the care of preserving oneself" (de Man 193). To insist on self-sufficiency out of the state of nature is, de Man asserts, thus contrary to self-preservation and, if desired, must arise from what Rousseau would call "a whim," the ultimate symptom of civilization. Within

society, we will always remain insufficient, considered in isolation from social totality.

Nevertheless, it was the destiny of Rousseau himself to give in to this whim, a biographical fact no critics of his political visions are late to point out. Failing to accomplish the true transparency within society, Rousseau would be forced into the interiority of himself. Yet it seems we are, again, served by de Man's intuition, when he insists that "if the notion of transparency is at all operative in Rousseau, it is certainly not associated with the concept of selfhood defined as 'amour de soi'" (165), and, further, the even more radical suggestion that, for Rousseau, "the self is not in principle a privileged category" (188). Without denying the truth of Rousseau's life, we may insist that his theory acknowledges the whimsical character of his ways. The truly radical insight of Rousseau would seem to be his claim that even what we perceive as ultimate freedom, namely the unbothered pursuit of our every whim or desire, is in fact illusory, because freedom is a property of what he refers to in *The Social Contract* as the *moi commune*, the common self. And it seems, furthermore, central to realize that this conception outlaws the sacrificial, or oppressive, logic that is applied to so much of Rousseau's thinking, insofar as it assumes the truth of the conflict between self and common will.

Somewhat paradoxically, we find a key to interpreting Rousseau hidden within his relationship to what we previously encountered as an object of fierce critique, and, in Honneth's analysis, the source for the failure of his political visions, namely the tradition drawing on St. Augustine. Patrick Riley, whose *The General Will before Rousseau* is generally regarded as the most erudite and rigorous study of the influence of the French Augustinians on Rousseau's development of the general will, goes far in acknowledging that Rousseau to a large degree adopts the Augustinian view according to which freedom cannot be thought of outside the participation in a given totality. He takes as an illuminating example the image of the body with many thinking members, which Rousseau uses in a manner reminiscent of Pascal's paraphrase of St. Paul, which clearly demonstrates the reciprocity between the state and its members: "Make man one, and you will make him as happy as he can be [...] For being nothing except by

[the body politic], they will be nothing except for her" (Rousseau qtd. in Riley 22). We find another pregnant formulation in the section of *Emile* titled the "Profession of the Savoyard Vicar," where we read that the difference between virtue and vice is not reducible to the presence or absence of order—"for I say that vice is the love of order taken in a different sense" (291, Book 4)—but whether order is erected on a common center or not.<sup>26</sup> "The good man," states the Vicar, "orders himself in relation to the whole, and the wicked one orders the whole in relation to himself" (292; Book 4).<sup>27</sup> Can and should we still insist, as does Arendt, and to some degree our other interlocutors, that individual happiness is contrary to the interest of the social body? Admittedly, this might be true of humans in our current state, but not necessarily of humans as they could be. It is true in a society that heralds the sovereignty of individual subjects, and nevertheless reproduces their perpetual unfreedom, but to view it as the enduring truth of human nature, rather than a failure to imagine that social totality that might render possible another human subject, is to underestimate the degree to which Rousseau's anthropology seeks to be more than a mere "return to nature."

### **Conclusion: A Marxist Philosopher or an Augustinian Anthropologist**

If Rousseau's critique departs from a postulate of human nature, it must be acknowledged that his work illustrates the immanent limits to the critical enterprise where nature is taken as a property belonging to the social totality. Being a child of his time, Rousseau's failed attempts to think beyond his own social reality seem, in a certain way, to prove Althusser right, if only by suggesting the persistence of another discrepancy than the ones formulated by him. Unable to give even a fictive account of the estate that would enable virtue conceived of not as in opposition to individual freedom but the very precondition of freedom, it seems natural that the illusion of self-sufficiency, the state of the Stoic sage, would prove to be the ultimate consolation for Rousseau himself, and the one he praises in his last writings, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Nevertheless, it seems possible to conceive



of *Julie* as being not first and foremost an internal critique of Rousseau's own utopia but rather as pointing to the very limits of critique as such. Rather than to think that Rousseau's inherits the "negative anthropology" distinctive of French moralism, which Honneth identifies as the conviction that humans are ultimately unable to access the truth about themselves as well as others (what we may, with Starobinski, call the lack of transparency pertaining to the human condition), Rousseau's would illustrate the difficulty of thinking of human nature in the purely negative. To conclude, the fault of Rousseau's negative anthropology would not be its "uncritical" request that we return to nature but his failure to withdraw fully from the facts of the present when imagining what human nature could become. Far from suggesting that Rousseau manages to complete the task of Marxist philosophy as defined by Foucault, the discussion above has hopefully managed to demonstrate why his might be seen as a first, if failed, attempt.

## Endnotes

1. "il n'y a point de perversité originelle dans le cœur humaine" (OC IV 322).
2. "Non in depravatis, sed in his quæ bene secundum naturam se habent, considerandum est quid sit naturale" (OC III 109).
3. "Ce que Rousseau découvre ou invente, c'est le transcendantal comme la négativité même, ou si l'on préfère: la *négativité transcendante*" (*Poétique de l'histoire*, 42–43).
4. "originairement, un comédien" (*Poétique de l'histoire*, 51).
5. "quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te" (*Confessions*. Books 1–8, 2).
6. "Gott [ist] das summe esse, das je eigene Sein und nicht das der creatura schlechthin entgegengesetzte" (*Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* 63).
7. "il s'en faut bien, selon moi, que cette doctrine du péché original sujette à des difficultés si terribles, ne soit contenue dans l'Écriture ni si clairement ni si durement qu'il a plu au Rhéteur Augustin et à nos Théologiens de la bâtir" (OC IV 937–38).

8. "Tout est bien, sortant de mains de l'auteur des choses: tout dégénère entre les mains de l'homme" (OC IV 245).
9. "L'Homme est né libre, et par-tout il est dans les fers" (OC III 351).
10. "on réuniroit dans la République tous les avantages de l'état naturel à ceux de l'état civil, on joindroit à la liberté qui maintient l'homme exempt de vices la moralité qui l'élève à la vertu" (OC IV 311).
11. "l'acquis de l'état civil la liberté morale, qui seule rend l'homme vraiment maître de lui; car l'impulsion du seul appetit est esclavages, et l'obéissance à la loi qu'on s'est prescrite est liberté" (OC III 365).
12. "Celui qui ose entreprendre d'instituer un peuple doit se sentir en état de changer, pour ainsi dire, la nature humaine; de transformer chaque individu, qui par lui-même est un tout parfait et solitaire, en partie d'un plus grand tout don't cet individu reçoive en quelque sorte sa vie et son être; d'altérer la constitution de l'homme pour la renforcer" (OC III 381).
13. Originally presented at the colloquium "Property, Sovereignty, and the Theotropic: Paul de Man's Political Archive," at Irvine, in 2009.
14. "Nous ignorons ce que nôtre nature nous permet d'être" (OC IV 281).
15. "Il importe beaucoup pour celui-ci. Un Portrait a toujours son prix pourvu qu'il ressemble, quelque'étrange que soit l'Original. Mais dans un Tableau d'imagination, toute figure humaine doit avoir les traits communs à l'homme, ou le Tableau ne vaut rien" (OC II 11).
16. "les personnages sont des gens de l'autre monde" (OC II 12).
17. "C'est le métier de Prédicateurs de nous crier: *Soyez bons et sages*, sans beaucoup s'inquiète du succès de leurs discours; le citoyen qui s'en inquiète ne doit point nous crier sotement: *Soyez bons*; mais nous faire aimer l'état qui nous porte à l'être" (OC II 20).
18. "qui ne regarde qu'à nous, est content quand nos vrais besoins sont satisfaits; mais l'amour-propre, qui se compare, n'est jamais content et ne sauroit l'être, parce que ce sentiment, en nous préférant aux autres, exige aussi que les autres nous préfèrent à eux" (OC IV 493).

19. “On croit que l’homme a un vif amour pour sa conservation, et cela est vrai, mais on ne voit pas que cet amour tel que nous le sentons es ten grande partie l’ouvrage des hommes” (OC IV 307).

20. “De lui-même le people veut toujours le bien, mais de lui-même il ne le voit pas toujours” (OC III 380).

21. “qu’on le forcera d’être libre” (OC III 364).

22. “Si Sparte et Rome ont péri, quell Etat peut espérer de durer toujours? Si nous voulons former un établissement durable, ne songeons donc point à le rendre éternel. Pour réussir il ne faut pas tenter l’impossible, ni se flater de donner à l’ouvrage des hommes unde solidité que les choses humaines ne comportment pas” (OC III 424).

23. “Comme la volonté particuliere agit sans cesse contre la volonté générale, ainsi le Gouvernement fait un effort continuel contre la Souveraineté [...] C’est-là le vice inherent et inevitable qui dès la naissance du corps politique tend sans relâche à le détruire” (OC III 421).

24. A published version of his Seeley Lectures delivered in 2017.

25. A notion he states in a footnote to use with reference to the French Moralists following Karlheinz Stierle (footnote 5, 13).

26. “car je dis aussi, moi, que le vice est l’amour de ordre, pris dans un sens different” (OC IV 602).

27. “le bon s’ordonne par raport au tout et que le méchant ordonne le tout par raport à lui” (OC IV 602).

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# 14. Subjectivity and Sensibility: On the Concept of *Gemüt* in Kant's Aesthetics

Anna Enström

## Summary

Kant's critical philosophy is typically recognized, by both its defenders and its critics, as a founding moment for the autonomous and rational subject of Western modernity. This emphasis on rationality concerning subjectivity in Kant has been especially strong within the field of aesthetics ever since Nietzsche's dismissal of Kantian aesthetic judgment as disengaged disinterest. However, recent research has challenged this assumption by showing how Kantian reason itself is shaped in relation to human sensibility (Nuzzo). By looking at the fundamental yet peripheral concept of *Gemüt* in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), ambiguously defined in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798) as the "faculty of feeling and thinking," this chapter suggests a retrieved notion of the judging subject of aesthetics. When the sensibility and situated corporeality of *Gemüt* is stressed, an interpretational shift of broader methodological significance can be outlined.

## Introduction

In European philosophy and critical theory, Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy is widely regarded as articulating the framework of the autonomous and rational subject—an enduring model of subjectivity that features prominently in standard accounts of the Humanist tradition and has become a signature for Enlightenment modernity.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Kant's formulations of the transcendental a priori conditions of knowledge, morality, and judgment have been interpreted as reinforcing the general inferiority of sensibility within his system, particularly in his aesthetic theory.<sup>2</sup> Drawing

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on Angelica Nuzzo's seminal reconstruction of Kant's theory of sensibility in *Ideal Embodiment*, this chapter traces an alternative trajectory for Kantian subjectivity. Rather than proceeding from a hierarchical relationship between sensibility and rationality, I propose a conception of the subject that traverses both domains, encompassing the full spectrum of human sensibility. To this end, I address the function of the concept *Gemüt*—a term that can be approximately translated as *mind*—which, while simultaneously fundamental and marginal in Kant's work, opens new interpretative possibilities. Instead of analyzing the concept with regard to epistemological concerns, I turn to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790)<sup>3</sup> and the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798). By demonstrating the concept's links to both body and thought, I argue that foregrounding the inherent sensibility of *Gemüt*—rather than limiting it to rational connotations—can modify our understanding of the aesthetic subject. This reading nuances the prevailing portrayal of Kant as a constant advocate of pure rationality in the history of the modern subject<sup>4</sup>—a role that has also positioned Kantian philosophy as a key source of the normative Eurocentrism and homogenizing universalism that undergirds racist thought, rendering it increasingly obsolete in relation to critically engaged strands of contemporary aesthetic thought (Eze; Bernasconi; Mignolo; Mills). The guiding questions that underpin this exposition of *Gemüt*—and which I leave open for further inquiry—are the following: Can a reworked notion of subjectivity carry broader implications for critical engagement within the Kantian tradition? And, further, might such a reworking contribute to the articulation of another humanism?

## Metaphysics and Anthropology. A Problematic Between Geist and Body

In *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929) Martin Heidegger argues that the central outcome of the ground-laying of metaphysics in the exposition of the conditions for knowledge in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781 and 1787) lies in the insight into the necessary connectedness of anthropology and metaphysics.<sup>5</sup> He writes that the question of the essence of metaphysics is the question

concerning the unity of the basic faculties of the human mind: “der Einheit der Grund-vermögen des menschlichen ‘Gemüts’” (“Kant und das Problem” 205–06). Interestingly, Heidegger brackets the term *Gemüt* with quotation marks. With this salient graphic designation Heidegger points out the term as that particular field of investigation by which Kant’s insights into synthesis, and knowledge as a kind of representation, can be freed from traditional logic and instead be directed toward his own concern: a fundamental comprehension of the problem of being.<sup>6</sup>

Three decades later, Foucault similarly places *Gemüt* at the center of his own take on the tension between metaphysics and anthropology in Kant. In Foucault’s *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology* (1961)—accompanying his own translation into French of Kant’s 1798 book *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*—he conducts a critique of the Kantian subject of knowledge as the very foundation of modern philosophy.<sup>7</sup> His point there is that the transcendental subject of time—the a priori that requires no empirical knowledge for the presupposition of its existence and which distinguishes the exposition of the conditions of possible experience in Kant’s idealism—is contradicted by the historically existing subject of empirical self-observation in his anthropology. This is a contradiction that thereby undermines the notion of any subjectivity that could constitute a foundation for the empirical sciences.

Foucault contends that in its ground-laying of the conditions for thought the transcendental subject is the premise of all empirical knowledge. However, if the subject itself simultaneously can be studied as an object of knowledge it ceases to serve as such an unambiguous ground. Foucault localizes this paradoxical alternation between a knowing subject—existing “before”—and a subject to be known—existing “within” the anthropological investigation—to the question of the *Gemüt*, a term that is translated by Foucault as *esprit* and narrowly interiorized when being rendered the meaning of inner sense (*Sinn*), the form of which is time (Kant, *Anthropologie* 198). Foucault’s examination of the source of transcendental thought and the uncovering of the empirical foundations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in language are thus summed up in the problem of how we are to understand



*Gemüt*—as inner sense—as a world citizen (*Weltbürger*), whose life in the world is a dwelling in language (*Introduction* 102, 97). It is this contradiction that produces the constant state of slippage between the transcendental and the empirical perspectives on the subject, which further is said to characterize modern philosophy, a dynamic Foucault will later in the *Order of Things* (1966) address as man's empirico-transcendental doubling (347).

The connectedness of metaphysics and anthropology, which Heidegger issues, as well as the resulting tension between these areas that Foucault later pinpoints, constitute the outer frames of the reworked notion of the Kantian judging subject of aesthetics suggested in my exposition of *Gemüt*.<sup>8</sup> The following demonstrates how the problem of *Gemüt* is localized between *Geist* (spirit, intellect) and sentient body, and why it also overlaps with the above stated tension between metaphysics and anthropology in Kant. However, this overlap is not total since the specific dynamic between *Geist* and body in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* does not exhaust the multitude of exegetical and philosophical problematics generated by this tension. In order to investigate the essential tension of *Gemüt* I refer to Gaston Bachelard's sense of the term "problematics" (and "problem") in *Reason Applied* (1949), where he shows how an object of scientific inquiry can belong to several problematics. My appeal to Bachelard's notion of the problematic is made in order to refute the idea—or the ideal—of a general coherence in Kant's corpus, an inherent consistency that waits to emerge as soon as every antinomy or contradiction has been solved through a logical reconstruction of the text.<sup>9</sup> Clearly described by Patrice Maniglier, Bachelard's concept of the problematic works as a critique of such a clear-cut subject-object relation (21–23) can also be broadened to include the relationship between interpreter and text. Extended to a methodological motif for textual analysis, as in this account of *Gemüt*, one implication of the Bachelardian problematic is that to address the theoretical problem at stake in the relationship between metaphysics and anthropology in Kant's thought—and to work in between these areas—implies an openness as to how Kant's critical, transcendental, and so-called applied philosophy (foremost the anthropological writings) can be mediated with one another with regard to specific, singular problems.

It is as such a problem that I perceive *Gemüt*, which—in its duplicity as both a basis of the transcendental critique of pure reason and as an emblem of the anthropological delimitation of this field—supports the sensibility-centered subjectivity argued for in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the so-called third *Critique*.

## A Historical and Textual Overview

Kant uses *Gemüt* in several key passages. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* the term holds a cognitive meaning as it denotes the obscure root of the transcendental synthesis of the receptivity of intuition and the spontaneity of the concepts of the understanding, namely the transcendental interconnection of the faculties of knowledge invoked by Heidegger. And in §1 in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant notably declares that what makes the judgment of taste aesthetic is that the representation is related to the subject's feeling of life (pleasure or displeasure) (89–90. AA 5:203–04). That is, judgment is made by comparing the representation of the object with the faculty of representation as a whole, of which the mind—*Gemüt*—becomes aware in the very feeling of its own state. The “self-animation” thereby entailed in aesthetic reflection constitutes the kernel of the term's aesthetic meaning.

Despite the concept's essential function in the critiques of knowledge and aesthetic judgment, it is only in the *Anthropology* that Kant—albeit in passing—delineates it more clearly. In §24, “On Inner Sense,” concerning the sphere of inner experience and the consciousness of being affected by one's own thoughts, *Gemüt* is defined as the “faculty of feeling [/perceiving] and thinking” (“das Vermögen zu empfinden und zu denken”) (*Anthropology* 53. AA 7:161). This phrasing is essential since it works as a conceptual seismograph that registers the fundamental tension in Kant's thought at large between receptive sensibility and spontaneous understanding. Being the heading of an obscure third faculty, *Gemüt* immanently links these distinct faculties, also by way of encompassing both what enables experience—the transcendental structures—and this experience itself that is our representations and sensations.<sup>10</sup> These features motivate the concept's significant role with regard to how relationships between inner and outer sense (*Sinn*), subject and world, are to be understood.

To demonstrate the distinctive character of Kant's use of *Gemüt*, especially the term's aesthetic aspect, a brief conceptual history is now outlined. Apart from the interventions of Heidegger and Foucault, the role of the term in Kant's thought has mainly been sidelined. It is only lately that more systematic analyzes have been made within Kant scholarship such as the pioneering studies of Pedro Jesús Teruel and Valerio Rohden, which both attend to *Gemüt* with regard to translation issues (Teruel; Rohden). This focal point is representative also of Howard Caygill's entry on the term in his lexical-philosophical survey of Kant's works (210–12).<sup>11</sup> These contributions together display a broad meaning of this enigmatic concept in German philosophy, where it stands for both consciousness and feeling, heart and emotion and ranges from the Greek *thumos*, the Latin *animus* and *mens* to the English *mood* and *mind*. As its prefix *Ge-* indicates, the term implies a “community function,” a composition of different *Muten* (modes, conditions, dispositions), from several levels of man's intellectual and emotional life. This “community function” is essential to understand the concept's workings and analytical potential with regard to the question of subjectivity in Kant's theory of reflexive aesthetic judgment, or aesthetic experience to use a more contemporary term.

The specific Kantian “community sense” of *Gemüt* then comes close to the term's meaning in the medieval mystical tradition, where it refers to the totality of an inner world, to beliefs and ideas. In Meister Eckhart, for example, *mens/Gemüt* denotes a deeper force in the soul that constitutes its higher part, and in the sixteenth century the term is associated with Paracelsus, with whom it stands for an inner emotional depth, a place where man is reunited with himself. During the second half of the eighteenth century, *Gemüt* is mostly used as a synonym for *Seele* (soul), related to desire and will, and is further in sharp contrast with the intellectual or spiritual theorizing of *Geist*. However, this is not the case in Kant's use of the term in the third *Critique*, where *Geist* is fundamentally connected with *Gemüt* as its animating principle by way of the capacity for aesthetic ideas (see §49 192. AA 5:313).<sup>12</sup> As I will address shortly, this tie between *Geist* and *Gemüt* is furthermore entwined with bodily sensibility.

Kant's *Gemüt* thereby significantly differs from the primarily practical meaning it has in his rationalist predecessors, like Leibniz and Wolff, by implying a rare continuity between passivity and activity via feeling and mood. Teruel, Rohden, and Caygill all stress that the concept thereby plays a central role in Kant's overcoming of a certain body/soul dualism. Their observation is particularly interesting with reference to the term's aesthetic meaning in Kant's use. Since in addition to its cognitive designation of the formal locus for the relations of the faculties—the a priori condition of any dissonant or coherent interaction between the imagination, the understanding and reason—*Gemüt*, in its aesthetic guise, also comprises the animation of these faculties as well as the very (empirical) experience of the effect of their action on thinking. In other words, the feeling of thought or the mind's experience of itself.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, after Kant, the philosophical vocabulary of German idealism comes to prioritize *Geist*. For example, Hegel in his *Aesthetics Lectures* (1835–1838) identifies *Gemüt* with the heart in contrast to the abstract universality of the will. In the late nineteenth century, its sense of temperament becomes more common and with its transformation into an adjective, *gemütlich*, the term gradually drifts toward an everyday-language concept of well-being.<sup>14</sup> This shift in meaning could be one explanation to the scarce interest in the concept's philosophical function in Kant, especially in a German context. Nevertheless, *Gemüt* is entirely central to subjectivity in Kant.

## The Aesthetics–Anthropology Axis

Similarly to Heidegger and Foucault, I align Kant's critical philosophy with his *Anthropology*. However, instead of attending to *Gemüt* with regard to issues of epistemology and the first *Critique*, I turn to its role in the third *Critique*. Furthermore, the third *Critique* and the *Anthropology* make up a particular constellation with regard to their mutual perspective on humans. Before proceeding it is necessary to clarify this “aesthetics–anthropology axis,” since it is constructive for a conceptualization of aesthetic judgment that stresses the importance of sensibility and situated

corporeality to this mode of experience. This methodological conjunction is motivated by Hannah Arendt's categorization of Kant's critical works according to their different perspectives on the human being, by which a viewpoint common to the third *Critique* and the *Anthropology* can be discerned. In Arendt's 1982 lectures on the third *Critique*, each *Critique*—the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*—is characterized according to its specific outlook on man. Arendt points out that, while the first *Critique* concerns the human species and its progress (the possibility of progress in the sciences), the second involves Man with capital letter, namely as a moral being who is an end in themselves. In contrast, the viewpoint of the third—that is, with regard to the judgment of taste—concerns humans: humans in the sense of the shared existence of plurality, whose true end is sociability (the very sociality that conditions political life) and who are even endowed with an a priori attentive sensibility toward sociality within their thinking, the sense of community that Kant famously calls *sensus communis* (§40, §42). The intersubjectively formative principle of *sensus communis* moreover sheds light on the fact that sensibility in *Gemüt*, by force of the interplay of intellect and body in its aesthetic “community sense,” also holds a social dimension.

As if indirectly opposing Foucault's critique of the doubling of the figure of man, sedimented in the problem of *Gemüt* as *Weltbürger*, Arendt states that a necessary precondition for understanding Kant at all is to make distinctions between these three perspectives (26). Arendt's account of the third *Critique* likewise demonstrates its thematic link to the *Anthropology*: Both deal with man as a living earthbound being, an intellectual, moral, and sentient whole viewed in a social plural. This intimate bond further explains why the former is so entrenched in tangible cultural concerns such as joking,<sup>15</sup> although its stated subject matter is the analytic uncovering of the a priori principles of aesthetic and teleological powers of judgment.

## Restoring Balance

Of the two particular designations of *Gemüt*, which together emphasize the centrality of sensibility and embodiment in the

constitution of aesthetic subjectivity in Kant, one has already been cited in the above quote from the *Anthropology*: the definition of *Gemüt* as the capacity to feel/perceive (*zu empfinden*) and to think. By this way of denoting one specific faculty, the concept's ambiguous doubling—encompassing both the transcendental structures that Kant claims enable experience and this experience itself, that is, our representations and sensations—institutes a crossing of the boundary between the fields of sensibility and understanding. Thereby, it opens for a critique of the meaning and implementation of this fundamental divide in Kant's thought, a divide often mistaken for being synonymous to the supremacy of reason and understanding at the expense of the suppression of sensibility in both its a priori (imagination, time/space as forms of intuition) and material form.

The ambiguous designation of *Gemüt* in the *Anthropology*, as well as its immanent critique of its own integral (dis)unity, sheds light on the second key designation. This is found in the last section of the “General Remark on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments” under §29 in the third *Critique*, where Kant declares that *Gemüt* “for itself is entirely life (the principle of life itself), and hindrances or promotions must be sought outside it, though in the human being himself, hence in combination with his body” (§29, 159. AA 5:278). This is a description that once more highlights the concept's slippage between a cognitive and an aesthetic meaning, involving the mind's experience of itself in relationship to a body to which it both belongs and is external to. By way of its existence as a principle—that is, a condition of possibility—*Gemüt*, when inaugurated as the very principle of life itself, is simultaneously inseparable from the animation (experience) it enables, thus linking formal/intellectual and experiential/bodily sensibility.<sup>16</sup> This animation, or the promotion of life in/of *Gemüt*, is the feeling invoked in the above cited opening paragraph of the third *Critique*, where the aesthetic judgment (of beauty) is made with regard to the alleged self-animation of *Gemüt*, which proceeds from the comparison of the representation of the object with the faculty of representation as a whole.

By way of cross-reading the passage from the *Anthropology* with §§1 and 29 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, I suggest an interpretational modification of *Gemüt* that emphasizes

*empfinden* (feeling/perceiving) instead of *denken* (thinking). Thereby the balance between sensibility and understanding is restored—a balance that Nietzsche’s influential dismissal in the *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) of aesthetic judgment in Kant as merely disengaged disinterest successfully eclipsed—and an extended notion of the Kantian judging subject of aesthetics can surface. This is a critical notion of the subject, however, with a trajectory alternative to emblematic contemporary critiques of Kantian subjectivity, echoing Nietzsche, as the self-recognized empty base of objectivity.<sup>17</sup> By stressing the sensibility and situated corporeality comprised in the concept *Gemüt*, the view of Kant as an advocate of pure rationality—shared not only by its critics but also by its defenders—can be revised. To a great extent, it is on the basis of such assumed logocentrism in his works that Kant has come to symbolize the normative subjectivity of Eurocentric male whiteness, and that his theory on aesthetic judgment is argued to most prominently work as a neocolonialist fallacy organizing both aesthetic and racist thought (Lloyd). This view of a logocentrism, excluding other dynamics in Kant’s thought, is further thoroughly supported by the conjectures that dominate modern anglophone Kant scholarship. Prominent examples of the favoring of the logic of concepts and the faculty of the understanding are, together with the simultaneous downplaying of the importance of sensibility, recurrently found in epistemology, as well as in aesthetics.

This general accent on rationality in Kant leads us back to the meaning of *Gemüt*, since—as a result of translation together with philosophical interest—prominence is usually given to the term’s cognitive and rational signification, to *denken*, overlooking the “feeling and perceiving” facet of *Gemüt*.<sup>18</sup> This is most evident in the standard English translation, where *Gemüt* and *Geist* are reduced to *mind*, which just like Foucault’s *esprit* purifies the cognitive aspect and is strongly marked by its “intellectualized” opposition to *body* and the sensibility of embodiment in reflective thought.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, *mind* is generally closer to the Cartesian *mens* than Kant’s more Aristotelian *animus*, his own translation of *Gemüt* in the anthropology lectures, which signifies the

simultaneous receptive reaction to sensory impressions and their active apprehension in reflection (*Anthropologie* AA 25:424).<sup>20</sup>

### Toward a Richer Notion of the Aesthetic Subject

To conclude, I draw on the work of Nuzzo, who has systematically shown how Kantian reason is itself shaped through a transcendental human form of a priori sensibility, however, without attending to the special status of *Gemüt* for this issue. Especially productive to my exposition of the term, regarding subjectivity in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, is Nuzzo's notion of reason's *ideal*, or *transcendental, embodiment* (223). By way of a wide-ranging domain, synonymous neither with an empirical and material sphere nor with transcendental functions such as forms of intuition and the faculty of imagination, Kantian sensibility itself transcends any dualistic division of thought and body. Akin to sensibility's own transgressive feature, the notion of an ideal embodiment accordingly clarifies that Kant's dividing line between "pure" and "empirical" does not separate a metaphysical subject from a physical body. Rather, throughout the three *Critiques* Nuzzo demonstrates how the body is conceptualized as being equally *ideal* as the subject is *real* (8).

It is this constitutive groundlessness of the subject's sensuous existence (Nuzzo 217)—man's dual belonging to nature and freedom—that Kant calls attention to in §5 when he declares the experience of beauty to be valid only for humans, that is, animal but at the same time rational beings (*Critique of the Power* §5, 95. AA 5:210). The feeling of aesthetic animation in beauty, demonstrated in the aesthetic sense of *Gemüt*, is tied to the empirically given while it simultaneously involves the transcendence of ideas from this given. Aesthetic experience thereby comprises the subject's experience of herself as both sensibility and reason—or, in other words, as physically as well as ideally embodied. That Kant's work would merely imply a rational foundation for subjectivity is hence an incomplete picture. By invoking the multifaceted nature of the liminal concept *Gemüt*—which fully coincides neither with *Geist* nor with the body but which, as the faculty of feeling/



perceiving and thinking, has part in both—a notion of aesthetic subjectivity that expands such reductive claims can be recognized.

## Endnotes

1. One of the more eloquent formulations of the Enlightenment's interpretation of thinking as "the creation of unified, scientific order" is still found in Adorno and Horkheimer (81).
2. Theories of art that emphasize inter alia embodied experience as an active component in the creation of meaning vis-à-vis the artwork have instead privileged a phenomenological approach. One prominent example is the relationship of American minimalism to phenomenology. See Potts (207–10).
3. The referenced passages in Kant's work include the standard page numbering in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*. Akademie Ausgabe (abbreviated AA). Bd. 1–25. Berlin: Königliche Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften/De Gruyter, 1902–1997.
4. I have at length discussed Kant's notion of sensibility and its multifaceted function in his aesthetics in my dissertation. This chapter is based on the first three chapters of the thesis. See Enström.
5. In short, Kant's critical metaphysics implies establishing the limits of human reason, so that judgments are not extended to knowledge of metaphysical objects such as *God*, *world*, or *soul*. Heidegger refers to these limitations of knowledge to finite reason when he argues that Kant's grounding of metaphysics is a questioning with regard to the human being, that is, to anthropology.
6. In other words, how finite reason enables ontological synthesis, a field suitable neither for psychology nor for logic but only for an analytic (of finitude). See Weatherston 276–97.
7. The introduction was presented in 1961 as part of Foucault's doctoral thesis and is largely a reflection on humanism, the status of man in modernity, and positivist knowledge on the basis of Kant's question "What is man?" Parts of the text were published in 1964 together with Foucault's translation of the *Anthropology*.
8. The interplay in Kant's thought between metaphysics's uncovering of the universal a priori principles of knowledge/morality/

judgment and anthropology's reflections on the social and historical embeddedness of human existence, are well elaborated within several research areas in Kant scholarship. A significant reference for this chapter is Alix Cohen's writings on feeling in Kant. See Cohen, "Kantian Account" 429–60; Cohen, "Anthropology of Cognition" 76–93.

9. Addressing ambiguous concepts and contradictory claims in such a divisive "problem solving" approach means that the interpreter, on the basis of a particular assertion in Kant, authorizes themselves to rephrase the contradictory passages in order to achieve the goal of general coherence. See Allison 116–18; Guyer 98–99.

10. In the introduction to the third Critique, Kant divides the faculties of *Gemüt*, which sum up our entire theoretical-aesthetic-practical capacity, into a table: the faculty of knowledge, the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, and the faculty of desire. The faculties are thus presented as three different determinations of *Gemüt*, stratified into a lower and a higher part within the field of sensibility and reason, respectively. However, Kant's tableau only marks the higher strata of the faculties, the a priori principles that form the basis of their autonomy. *Gemüt* constitutes the given basis for both the lower and higher strata of the faculties, yet there is no coherent theory to explain the transitions between these meanings. See Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Introduction, IX, 83. AA 5:198.

11. For another source to the concept's history, see Thouard 373–75.

12. See also the *Anthropology*, where Kant posits *Geist* as the animating principle in the human being (§57, 129. AA 7:225) and in *Gemüt* through ideas (§71, 143. AA 7:246), respectively. An animating principle differs from a determining or a regulating one, the active principles with regard to knowledge and morality. Unlike these, the animating principle is not only activated a priori, oriented toward the field of experience, but is also active within experience, in life. As the animating principle of *Gemüt*, *Geist* marks an aesthetic concept of life that encompasses an "inner principle" as well as an "outer," bodily manifestation.

13. This is what lingering in beauty means: "We linger over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself," Kant, *Critique of the Power of Reason*, §12, 107. AA 5:222. For a perspective on the self-strengthening and

reproducing form of aesthetic reflection expanded to issues of the sensuousness of thought, see Lyotard.

14. For example, this connotation of *Gemüt* finds its counterpart in the Swedish *gemytlig* (convivial, cozy).

15. The section on jokes, wit, and laughter in the Remark that follows §53 (headed as “§54” in later editions) in the third *Critique* is one of the most extensive. See Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 207–212. AA 5:330–336.

16. This a priori/a posteriori doubling of life as a principle, mirrors how the principle of the synthetic a priori judgment in the first *Critique* is described to enable the very experience (knowledge of an object in general) which constitutes its own evidentiary basis. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A158/B197, A149/B188, A737/B765.

17. Two of the more influential contributions within cultural theory and art history are Eagleton and Jones.

18. *Gemüt* has also been concentrated to meanings within the field of ethics, thereby overlooking its inherent aesthetic sensibility.

19. One example is a recent study of Kant’s cognitive theory of the faculties, which emphasizes the necessity of interpreting *Gemüt* as mind. See Falduto 1–3, 24–33. See also Ameriks; Brooks. However, as Thouard points out, translating *Gemüt* to mind collapses Kant’s distinctions between *mens*, *spiritus*, and *animus*, a dissolution that entails an anachronistic projection of the more theoretical use of *Geist* (spirit or intellect) which is characteristic for Hegel and the German idealists (374).

20. *Gemüt* is the faculty by which the self is aware of how it is affected as a whole, that is, by its own faculties. *Gemüt* is the ability to reflect on its own state. See Munzel’s introduction to her translation of the *Friedländer Lectures* (40). See also Meld Shell, “Kant as ‘Vitalist’” 151–71; Meld Shell, *Kant and the Limits of Autonomy* 95.

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*Another Humanism* offers a critical rereading of the humanist tradition, from Michel de Montaigne to Immanuel Kant, and demonstrates its continued relevance today. Engaging with contemporary posthumanist and postanthropocentric debates—prompted by climate change and the epoch known as the Anthropocene—the book explores various forms of subjectivity and critique within humanism that speak directly to today's most pressing questions.

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