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Paper: BRITISH POETRY AND DRAMA: 14TH TO 17TH CENTURIES

Topic: Michel de Montaigne, 'Of a Monstrous Child' (1580), from Essays

Introduction

"I am no philosopher." Michel de Montaigne is no philosopher, on several counts, and proudly says so. Montaigne understands "philosopher" as someone indifferent to pain and pleasure, inhumanly (and sometimes comically) persistent in his convictions, just like Pyrrho who finished saying what he had to say even when his interlocutors had left the room. In a different context, Montaigne imagines a philosopher suspended from the towers of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, in a cage made of thin wire: although his reason tells him he will not fall, the philosopher will not be able to keep himself from being terrified by the sight of the space below him. Not only does Montaigne criticize philosophers for their inattentiveness to their own humanity, but he intentionally fashions his own writings to be unlike philosophy. Indeed, a reader who samples almost any one of the chapters of his *Essays*, published in the year 1580, will be struck by several unsettling features of Montaigne's thought and writing:

- Montaigne distrusts universal statements, and seems enamoured of the exception, of the particular case ("but there are some who . . ."). We move a general rule to an exception, then to an exception to the exception, until we seem to be left hanging. The impression of open-endedness that many chapters of the *Essays* convey² is linked to the author's willingness to indulge any sort of particular case.

- Montaigne is also noted for his attention to the influence of the human body, and what we like to call the “human” element, on behaviour and thought. The suspended philosopher can’t avoid being terrified by the sight below his feet.
- Finally, Montaigne “himself” is always present, also: rules, statements, observations undergo a sort of personal vetting. “As for me,” Montaigne will write, and what is right for himself, he readily concedes, is not necessarily right for anyone else (although it could be . . .). *The Essays* are definitely the recordings of the thoughts of a particular man living a particular life, and Montaigne is rather cocky in insisting on just that.

Given these features of his writing, Montaigne is certainly not a philosopher in the way in which the sixteenth century understood the practice of contemporary philosophy. His *Essays* are not written in the form of a treatise: that is, there is no attempt at systematic coverage of a topic, according to the questions or categories inherited from the tradition.

Although it has become customary to refer to the individual chapters of the *Essays* as “essays,” Montaigne himself never refers to a single chapter as an “essay.” He does refer to the entire book as his “essays,” and he does speak of his “essays” in a non-specific way. That is because the term *essai* in sixteenth-century French does not refer to a delineated segment of text, but instead retains the senses of “attempt,” “trying-out,” “test,” “practice,” “assay” that are still present in the French verb *essayer* (to try, to attempt, to taste) today. His book is full of all sorts of “attempts.” He tries out all sorts of judgments, of observations, of reflections, and of arguments. But these judgments, observations, reflections, arguments are all as it were suspended: they are not meant to be the final word on the matter. They are usually juxtaposed—sometimes directly, sometimes at a certain remove – with statements saying the contrary. In most cases Montaigne does not claim universal validity for his statements; he insists

on the fact that they are the product of his own judgment, and that another might judge differently. This skeptical meaning underlies Montaigne's use of the word "essay." Each individual chapter might contain, then, several "essays," several instances in which Montaigne "tries out" his judgment.

(the introduction has been borrowed from The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne)

Of a Monstrous Child

1. Understanding the Context of the Essay

As already stated, Montaigne's *Essais* or *Essays* was published in the year 1580. Originally written in French, the English translations of the text started to flow in, in the early 17th Century. The text contains a total of 107 essays, of which "Of a Monstrous Child" is the 102'nd essay. While the text talks of myriad topics and alludes to many realities of its time, one of those is the reality of society not accepting babies born with deformities or disabilities. Both these aspects were considered contrary to nature, or worse, as consequences of sin, in the Medieval Ages. The idea of monstrosity was created as a failure to explain the uncommon condition of any living creature. The killing of 'monstrous' babies born with 'deformities' has been traced back as far as the time of Aristotle. Michele de Montaigne's essay, therefore, "Of a Monstrous Child" is an example of this cultural trope, where the disabled child is a monstrous child. The essay is Montaigne's own experience of an encounter with such a child, and then his opinions are stated in a larger social context.

2. Understanding the Essay

Montaigne begins his essay with an objective description of the child when he comes across the three people who are carrying the "strange creature." Montaigne's description goes:

Under the breast it was joined to another child, but without a head, and which had the spine of the back without motion, the rest entire; for though it had one arm shorter than the other, it had been broken by accident at their birth; they were joined breast to breast, and as if a lesser child sought to throw its arms about the neck of one something bigger. . . The navel of the imperfect child could not be seen, but all the rest of the belly, so that all that was not joined of the imperfect one, as arms, buttocks, thighs, and legs, hung dangling upon the other, and might reach to the mid-leg.

Further, Montaigne goes on to write what the nurse “told us” about certain other features and bodily processes of the child. He soon switches to his own opinion about the “strange creature” as he iterates:

Those that we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of His work the infinite forms that He has comprehended therein; and it is to be believed that this figure which astonishes us has relation to some other figure of the same kind unknown to man. From His all wisdom nothing but good, common; and regular proceeds; but we do not discern the disposition and relation.

The narrative can be divided into two broad categories where firstly the observations are stated, and then a personal opinion of the same is iterated to the readers. Montaigne addresses no one in particular and also doesn't state either his observations or his inference, in the first-person.

The two broad categories of objective and subjective are bridged by a personal anecdote by the writer when he states:

I have just seen a herdsman in Medoc, of about thirty years of age, who has no sign of any genital parts; he has three holes by which he incessantly voids his water; he is bearded, has desire, and seeks contact with women.

It is also significant to note that Montaigne's personal opinion is formed and thereby explained from a religious perspective. In order to allude to and borrow from a similar perspective, Cicero (the Roman philosopher) is quoted twice from his work *De Divinatione*). This also acts to universalize the child's significance for Montaigne, where the child symbolises any living being born and perceived "contrary to nature".

3. Analysing the Essay

The image of the disabled child as a monstrous one has been contested by Montaigne. He attempts to exculpate the perception of the monstrous child, by bringing the themes of acceptance into consideration. By adhering to the Christian beliefs (the very same that were often used to regard disability as a consequence of sin), Montaigne has tried to assimilate monstrosity with humanity, since both humans and monsters are created in the eyes of God. While the initial objective narrative allows Montaigne's to describe the child in an unprejudiced way, the words "strange creature" are used to denote someone who is non-normative, or a form that deviates from the standard accepted description of a human body. He allows his readers to make-up their own minds about what he describes and then goes on to give his own opinion. The context of his time and age explains why he assumes that the child he has described will be called a monster by his readers. Montaigne's description of the child is objective only in that he passes no personal judgement. The description in itself, is defeated in its objectivity, as Montaigne begins by describing the child as a "strange creature" who happens to have similarities with "all the rest", and displays some "common form" and can "stand upon its feet; could go and gabble much like other children of the same age". From the very beginning he seeks to paint a picture of the strange, monstrous child as being similar, if not equal, to us humans.

Further, Montaigne also sees nature as being synonymous with God and religion. Quoting Cicero, he creates an analogy where anything new, or out of the ordinary, must not be considered “portent”, but should be considered a part of nature, since nothing is created outside it. Montaigne, thus, becomes critical of humanity’s ability to perceive ‘the other’ that does not adhere to its norm of physical appearance and ability, while incorporating ‘the other’ into humanity itself.