



Montaigne's Politics: Authority and Governance in the Essais

Biancamaria Fontana

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Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) is principally known today as a literary figure--the inventor of the modern essay and the pioneer of autobiographical self-exploration who retired from politics in midlife to write his private, philosophical, and apolitical *Essais*. But, as Biancamaria Fontana argues in *Montaigne's Politics*, a novel, vivid account of the political meaning of the *Essais* in the context of Montaigne's life and times, his retirement from the Bordeaux parliament in 1570 "could be said to have marked the beginning, rather than the end, of his public career." He later served as mayor of Bordeaux and advisor to King Henry of Navarre, and, as Fontana argues, Montaigne's *Essais* very much reflect his ongoing involvement and preoccupation with contemporary politics--particularly the politics of France's civil wars between Catholics and Protestants. Fontana shows that the *Essais*, although written as a record of Montaigne's personal experiences, do nothing less than set forth the first major critique of France's *ancien régime*, anticipating the main themes of Enlightenment writers such as Voltaire and Diderot. Challenging the views that Montaigne was politically aloof or evasive, or that he was a conservative skeptic and supporter of absolute monarchy, Fontana explores many of the central political issues in Montaigne's work--the reform of legal institutions, the prospects of religious toleration, the role of public opinion, and the legitimacy of political regimes.

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