

## **Benjamin Franklin's Three Montaignes: The *Essays*, the *Éloges*, the Man**

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In 1807, former United States president John Adams wrote a letter to Benjamin Rush in which he sought some literary advice. Rush was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a leader of the American Enlightenment, and incidentally, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Adams wrote: "I want to write an Essay. –Whom Shall I choose for a Model? – Plutarch, old Montaigne, Lord Bacon, Addison, Johnson, or Franklin?"<sup>1</sup> This grouping of possible muses immediately draws the attention of those interested in Montaigne.

Plutarch was considered by Montaigne to be an excellent source for knowledge about the "Manners" of great men, a foundation for Montaigne's project of education who opened the pathway to "converse with those great and heroic Souls of former and better Ages" (I, 25, 210 [I, 26, 156]).<sup>2</sup> To the extent that Montaigne invented or perfected the essay, then Bacon was indebted to him for paving the way for a new genre. As was Joseph Addison, one of the lead writers of *The Spectator* and Samuel Johnson, whose essays in the 1750s formed the backbone of *The Rambler*, which continued in the same vein as *The Spectator* in bringing discussion of subjects such as morality, literature, politics, and religion to the public sphere. And then there is Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790).

Franklin, one of America's "founding fathers," was the founder of the first public library in the United States. A bibliophile extraordinaire, he rose from humble origins to intellectual acclaim, starting as a printer and ending as an intellectual whose fame paralleled the likes of Voltaire. Journalist, scientist, colonial agent, and U.S. ambassador to France during the Revolutionary War,

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<sup>1</sup> "From John Adams to Benjamin Rush, September 1807," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5212>.

<sup>2</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essays of Michael Seigneur de Montaigne in Three Books*, trans. Charles Cotton, (London: 1711). Quotes are from period texts that Franklin would have read. Hence I use the Cotton translation, followed by the Villey version of the French in brackets: Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. Pierre Villey (Paris: PUF, 1999).

Franklin's life spanned the eighteenth century in all its intellectual diversity and international turmoil. His voluminous writings include the aphorisms of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, journalistic contributions to various newspapers, essays, pithy philosophical dialogues, political writings, a copious correspondence, scientific discourses, and his famous *Autobiography*. The academic literature on Franklin is equally voluminous, falling into various camps that seek to interpret his views on religion, virtue and vice, literary style, politics, the self, and education.<sup>3</sup> Like Montaigne, Franklin charmed his readers into looking at the world in different ways. By showing us how he looked at the world, including himself, Franklin teaches us how to look at ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

Adams specifically pairs "old Montaigne" with Franklin, lauding the latter's literary talents over his political acumen. Adams continues: "The last, if he had devoted his Life to the Study might have equalled Montaigne in Essays or La Fontaine in Fables: for he was more fitted for either or both than to conduct a Nation..."<sup>5</sup> What is it about Franklin that made him "fitted" for writing essays in the spirit of Montaigne? How might Franklin have read the *Essais*, or otherwise been exposed to the ideas of Montaigne? Can we infer any influence, direct or indirect, of Montaigne on Franklin?

To answer these questions, it is useful to think in terms of three different contexts in which Franklin was exposed to Montaigne. First, Franklin's own reading of the *Essais*. Here we must be careful not to project our contemporary readings of Montaigne onto Franklin, and seek instead to uncover how Franklin might have read and understood Montaigne in the context of the eighteenth century. Second, his exposure to both the critiques of Montaigne and the context surrounding two *Éloge de Montaigne* composed during his time in France. Finally, the parallels between the prevalent eighteenth century understanding of Montaigne as someone to be emulated and Franklin's own self-cultivated image. These exposures offer clues to understanding how Montaigne may have influenced the style and intent of Franklin's writings, and in the process, yield insight into the intellectual space occupied by Montaigne in the mind of one of America's first and most influential philosophers.

### Reading Montaigne in Franklin's Time

While Director of the Library Company – America's first subscription library based out of Philadelphia – Benjamin Franklin bequeathed an incomplete copy of the *Essays* (vols. 1 and 3 from the Cotton translation of 1685) on 19 February 1733.<sup>6</sup> His personal library contained an edition of

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Reappraising Benjamin Franklin: A Bicentennial Perspective* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Lerner, "Dr. Janus," in *Reappraising Benjamin Franklin*, ed. J.A. Leo Lemay (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993), 414-24.

<sup>5</sup> "From John Adams to Benjamin Rush, September 1807."

<sup>6</sup> In the same gift, he also included works by Locke: J.A. Leo Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin, Volume 2: Printer and Publisher, 1730-1747* (Philadelphia: University of

Montaigne's *Essais* in French – the folio edition from 1652. This edition contained Marie de Gournay's "Preface sur les Essais de Michel de Montaigne." It is considered the authoritative "vulgate" text on which later French editions were based, though the modernized punctuation, change in spelling of certain words, and substitution or subtraction of terms and alterations of structure make it slightly different from the initial posthumous editions from 1595-1598.<sup>7</sup> We also know that, while in France, Franklin borrowed "les trois dernieres Tomes de Montaigne," from Madame Brillon prior to 1780.<sup>8</sup> These were likely from one of the editions arranged by Pierre Coste, which included explanatory notes, and sometimes a small commentary on the *Essais*, Montaigne's letters, Gournay's preface, "des jugements et critiques" comprised of 25 separate chapters poached from the works of Pascal and Malebranche among others, and La Boétie's *Discours de la servitude volontaire*.<sup>9</sup>

Franklin was not the only "founding father" to have Montaigne in his library. Thomas Jefferson had 2 separate editions—both 3 volume sets (from 1659 and 1669). Alexander Hamilton had a copy that he read as a young artilleryman in 1776. John Adams also owned two complete copies of the *Essais* – a three volume edition edited by Coste from 1781, and the 10 volume edition, also by Coste, from 1771. But on the whole, copies of Montaigne in the colonies were rare. When they existed, they tended to be in large private libraries or in subscription libraries that catered to the educated elite.<sup>10</sup>

There are occasional references in colonial newspapers to Montaigne. One example from the *South Carolina Gazette* in 1772 identifies Montaigne as essential reading for those contemplating the human condition:

Montaigne, whom the French are obliged to for having taught them to think, gives us a very true and edifying description of the miseries of the great: 'Do fevers, gout, and apoplexies, says he, spare them any more than us? [...] At the last twitch of the gout, what signifies it to be called Sire and Majesty? [...] The least prick of a pin, or the least passion of the soul, is enough to deprive a man of the pleasure of being sole monarch of the world.'<sup>11</sup>

Another example from the *South Carolina and American Gazette* in 1770,

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Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 102.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Balsamo, "Publishing History of the Essays," in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 158-178, 167-168.

<sup>8</sup> "From Benjamin Franklin to Madame Brillon, 17 November 1780," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-34-02-0007>.

<sup>9</sup> Balsamo, "Publishing History," 167-168.

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca P. Hein, "Montaigne in the American Colonies," *The French-American Review* 6 (1982): 246-259, 252.

<sup>11</sup> "True Plesures are rendered the purer by a moderate Use of them," *South Carolina Gazette*, 11 June 1772; <https://accessible.com/accessible/emaileURL?AADoc=THESOUTHCAROLINAGAZETTE.SC1772061102.00002>.

makes the case for the education of women.<sup>12</sup> The only direct reference to Montaigne in Franklin's paper, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, during his tenure (1729-48) is from 29 December 1747, when Franklin reprinted an article previously published in the *London Magazine* on the importance of self-examination in forming a true judgment of oneself. Montaigne is quoted with the purpose of dispelling the judgments of more dogmatic voices: "What Judgment, as Montaigne says, the mad, vile, and *cruel* World makes of us, is, generally, of no Manner of Use to us; it adds nothing to our Souls or Bodies, nor lessens any of our Miseries."<sup>13</sup>

How might Franklin have read Montaigne? In a letter by François Adriaan Van der Kemp to John Adams, the author writes that he often sought to return to "my old friend and cheerful companion Montaigne – he beguiles the time – he cheers the heart he illumines the mind – I read him always again with a renewed pleasure."<sup>14</sup> While composed in 1815, the sentiments echo how Montaigne was read by those who admired him. Take as another example French statesman René-Louis de Voyer Argenson, who dedicated his retirement years to literary pursuits. In Argenson's *Essais dans le goût de ceux de Montaigne*, penned in the 1750s but not published until 1785, the author sheds light on how readers turned the pages of the *Essais*. Franklin owned a copy of the 1789 English edition of Argenson's Montaigne-inspired essays. In the preface, one reads:

I love Montagne [sic], I read him with pleasure; not that I think always like him, but because he gives me room to reflect, and to adopt a like or a contrary opinion to that of his own. Madame de Sevigny said, when she read his *Essays*, she imagined she was walking with him in her garden, and that they were conversing together. I think so likewise; and I find that Montagne [sic] appears frequently to advance propositions in order to bring on a little dispute which animates conversation, and renders it more lively and interesting: this is assuredly a good method of engaging the attention of the reader.<sup>15</sup>

The *Essais* are not a source of authority, but rather, a venue for exploring any manner of topics, including morality, politics, virtue, and the self. Argenson goes on to tell his readers how he, in the spirit of Montaigne, would want his book to be read: "I wish my book should be read... in moments of

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<sup>12</sup> "An ESSAY on the STUDIES proper for WOMEN," *South Carolina and American Gazette*, 20 April 1770; <https://accessible.com/accessible/emailedURL?AADoc=THESOUTHCAROLINAANDAMERICANGENERALGAZETTE.SC1770042027.00027>.

<sup>13</sup> "A New Method of Self-Examination," *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (29 December, 1747).

<sup>14</sup> "To John Adams from François Adriaan Van der Kemp, 28 June 1815," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6487>.

<sup>15</sup> René-Louis de Voyer Argenson, *Essays: Civil, Moral, Literary and Political Written After the Manner of M. de Montagne* (London: 1789), 1-2.

leisure; that it should be taken up and laid down at every page, but that after being shut, each article should be reasoned upon."<sup>16</sup> One did not sit and read Montaigne's *Essais* from cover to cover, but rather, the *Essais* were read in moments of leisure, perhaps even opened randomly, for insights, inspiration, and the chance to exercise one's mind as if in intelligent conversation.

There is evidence to suggest that Franklin read Montaigne in this way. While he never mentions Montaigne by name in any of his major writings, there are instances where he paraphrases passages from the tomes of Montaigne. Moreover, Franklin mimics Montaigne's undulating style, while also taking inspiration from his skepticism and challenge to dogmatic authority on questions of virtue, reason, and religion.

Shadows of Montaigne's influence on Franklin can be found in his early years, when he wrote essays and penned other burlesque pieces for *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, dashed off aphorisms for *Poor Richards Almanac*, and dallied in other intellectual pursuits. This corresponded to the time when a young Franklin read voraciously (including authors such as Plutarch, Lucretius, and Seneca—all beloved by Montaigne—as well as those inspired by Montaigne, including Bacon and Locke.) And, of course, Montaigne.

For example, Franklin's 1735 essay "Self-Denial Not the Essence of Virtue" from *The Pennsylvania Gazette* bears the hallmark of Montaigne's reasoning from the beginning "Of Cruelty," that virtue presupposes difficulty and contention.<sup>17</sup> In 1736 Franklin drew upon his copy of the *Essays* for sayings he used in *Poor Richard's Almanack*. As Robert Newcomb documented, Franklin penned three aphorisms derived from a single passage from "Of Experience." Franklin's aphorisms read:

He that can compose himself, is wiser than he that composes books (April).  
He that can take rest is greater than he that can take cities (February).  
The Masterpiece of Man, is to live to the purpose (January).<sup>18</sup>

The passage by Montaigne, from the Cotton translation Franklin possessed, reads:

Have you known how to compose your Manners? You have done a great deal more than he who has composed Books. Have you known how to take Repose? You have done more than he who has taken Cities and Empires. The glorious Master-piece of Man is to know how to live to purpose (III, 13, 453 [III, 13, 1108]).

Newcomb identifies a fourth aphorism, also from "Of Experience," and a fifth

<sup>16</sup> Argenson, *Essays*, 1-2.

<sup>17</sup>"Self-Denial Not the Essence of Virtue, 18 February 1735," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0004>.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Newcomb, "Benjamin Franklin and Montaigne," *Modern Language Notes* 72-7 (1957), 489-491, 490.

from “Of Repentance.”<sup>19</sup>

Following a lengthy period in England as a colonial agent (1757-1775) during which his writings were more political and polemical, Franklin relocated to France as the first U.S. Ambassador (1776-1785). And Montaigne returns to his philosophical orbit. We know the septuagenarian borrowed several tomes of Montaigne from Madame Brillion before 1780. The timing corresponds to Franklin’s authorship of several pithy pieces of a more personal nature that bare the fingerprints of Montaigne, as do some poignant observations in personal letters.

One certainly imagines Franklin taking inspiration from Montaigne in his circa 1780 Letter to the Royal Academy of Brussels (later printed as one of his *Bagatelles*) in which he proposed a way to make the natural, if not unsavory, act of farting more acceptable in public. Montaigne, from the Cotton translation, mused in “Of the Force of Imagination” about how we cannot always control our body functions:

The Vessels that serve to discharge the Belly have their own proper Dilatations and Compressions, without and beyond our Intelligence [...] I could heartily wish, that I only knew by Reading, how oft a Man’s Belly, by the Denial of one single Puff, brings him to the very door of an exceeding painful Death; and that the Emperor [Claudius] who gave liberty to let fly in all Places, had at the same time given us Power to do it (I, 20, 120-121 [I, 21, 102-103 n.4]).

Franklin laments the social requirement that “all well-bred People therefore, to avoid giving such Offence, forcibly restrain the Efforts of Nature to discharge that Wind.” Complaining in typical Montaignian fashion about the supposed authority of Aristotle – “Are there twenty Men in Europe at this Day, the happier, or even the easier, for any Knowledge they have pick’d out of Aristotle?” – he offers a solution to the odious smell of the fart that would have spared Montaigne from the tyranny of Claudius’s decree: “To discover some Drug wholesome & not disagreeable, to be mix’d with our common Food, or Sauces, that shall render the natural Discharges of Wind from our Bodies, not only inoffensive, but agreeable as Perfumes.”<sup>20</sup>

There are more unacknowledged fingerprints of Montaigne to be found in Franklin’s pithy piece, “Dialogue Entre La *Goute* et M. F.,” written before 1780 (which also became part of his *Bagatelles*). As a printer in the colonies, Franklin had reprinted an anonymous satire from 1699 at his press in 1732–*The Honour of the Gout* – in which Montaigne was quoted freely. In France, the gout-afflicted Franklin might have recalled this book, or reflected on Montaigne’s own musings:

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<sup>19</sup> Newcomb, “Benjamin Franklin and Montaigne,” 490.

<sup>20</sup> “From Benjamin Franklin to the Royal Academy of Brussels, [after 19 May 1780],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-32-02-0281>.

A Gentleman of my country, who was very often tormented with the Gout, being importun'd by his Physicians totally to reclaim his Appetite from all manner of salt Meats, was wont pleasantly to reply, that he must needs have something to quarrel with in the extremity of his Fits, and that he fancy'd, that railing at and cursing one while the *Bologna* Sawsages, and another the dry'd Tongues and the Hamms, was some mitigation to his Pain (I, 4, 24 [I, 4, 22]).

Perhaps Franklin put pen to paper to find a comedic and philosophical release from his sufferings of gout. In any case, he utilized a favorite literary device of Montaigne's, the dialogue, to communicate the pain and follies of the gout sufferer. Franklin's piece is a conversation between the persona of La Goute and Franklin, with the former playfully chastising Franklin for his over-indulgence in the pleasures of the human condition – food and drink, sex and chess.

Vous vous amusez à lire des Livres, des Brochures, ou Gazettes dont la pluspart n'en valent pas la peine. Vous dejeunez néanmoins largement; Quatre Tasses de Thé à la Crème avec une ou deux grandes Tartines de Pain et de Beurre couvertes de Tranches de Beuf fumé, qui je crois ne sont pas les choses du monde les plus faciles à digérer.<sup>21</sup>

Franklin's bagatelle was a subject in his epistolary exchanges with Madame Brillon, as was her similarly themed fable entitled "Le Sage et la Goutte." Franklin responded with echoes of Montaigne who, in "On Some Verses of Virgil" recognized his body growing old, but remained playfully defiant. Thus his saucy response:

Quand j'étois jeune homme, & que je jouissois plus des faveurs de la Sexe qu'à present, je n'avois point de Goutte: *Donc*, si les Dames de Passy auroient eu plus de cette espece de Charité chretienne que je vous ai si souvent en vaine recommandé, je n'aurois pas eu la Goutte actuellement.<sup>22</sup>

It is probably no coincidence that this is the same letter in which, at the end, Franklin thanked Madame Brillon for lending him some volumes of Montaigne: "Bien des remerciements pour les trois dernieres Tomes de Montaigne, que je renvoie."<sup>23</sup> As if to end their disagreement, Franklin, in a subsequent letter, echoed Montaigne's lament in the "Apology of Raymond Sebond" about the pliability of reason, especially when we are affected by "*Fevers, Debauches*, and great Accidents that affect our Judgments." Reason can

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<sup>21</sup> "Dialogue Entre La Goute et M. F.," [before 17 November 1780], *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-34-02-0006>.

<sup>22</sup> "From Benjamin Franklin to Madame Brillon, 17 November 1780," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-34-02-0007>.

<sup>23</sup> "From Benjamin Franklin to Madame Brillon, 17 November 1780."

lead people to very different judgments about the same subject, so Montaigne cautions one to “look well to himself” before coming to a judgment (II, 12, 357 [II, 12, 565]). In Franklin’s words:

La Raison humaine, ma chère Fille, doit être une Chose bien in-certaine, puisque deux Personnes sensées, comme vous et moi, peuvent tirer des mêmes Premises, les Conclusions diamétrale-ment opposées & contraires. Elle me paroît une Guide aveugle, cette Raison; et qu’un Instinct bon & sûr nous vaudroit beaucoup mieux.<sup>24</sup>

While one must be careful in making claims about the scope of Montaigne’s influence on Franklin—there are many possible sources of his early skepticism, his complex views on virtue and vice, his elusive stance on religion, his literary style, and his self-portraiture—the textual evidence suggests that Franklin’s mind was piqued by Montaigne’s ideas and style. From gout to farts, common vices to impossible virtues, Franklin and Montaigne invite the reader to think about the human condition by traveling from dogma to doubt to one’s own persona. The meandering inquiries of the *Essais*, Montaigne’s playful style, and the philosophical depth no doubt rubbed off on Franklin in those moments when he leafed through the pages of “old Montaigne.”

### The Critiques and *Éloges* of Montaigne

Franklin’s most explicit early exposure to Montaigne was likely through the lens of the Frenchman’s seventeenth century critics. As Franklin recounts in his *Autobiography*, his teenage reading habits included Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole’s *Logic; or the Art of Thinking*.<sup>25</sup> Originally published in French in 1662 and later translated into English—Franklin’s copy was from 1717—the authors condemn Pyrrhonism and the person they considered to be its modern incarnation: Montaigne. Montaigne’s *Essais* were nothing less than a “Treatise expressly compos’d to establish Pyrronism, and to destroy evidence and certainty...”<sup>26</sup> Montaigne corrupted the reader with his burlesque style, his amassing of examples and counter examples, his “defect of Judgment” and “violent love of himself.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, in a scathing rejection of Montaigne’s self-portrayal, the authors are dismayed that, despite “Confessing in his Book that he had bin guilty of Several Criminal Disorders, he declares nevertheless in

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<sup>24</sup> “From Benjamin Franklin to Madame Brillon, 23 November 1780,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-34-02-0022>.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings on Politics, Economic, and Virtue*, ed. Alan Houston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13; Lemay, *Life, Volume 1*, 69-71.

<sup>26</sup> Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic; or the Art of Thinking*, (London, 1685), 135.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.



other parts that he never repented of any, and that if he were to live over his life again, he would again act the same things... Horrible words, and which denote an utter extinction of all thoughts of Religion."<sup>28</sup>

But the young Franklin was not persuaded by these critiques. His youthful spirit was initially charmed by the skepticism of Socrates' method and attuned to the lessons on character derived from Plutarch's Lives – both highly esteemed by Montaigne. Moreover, the style and intent of Franklin's own writing contains almost all of the traits criticized in the *Logic*. It is also noteworthy that after his death, Franklin was described by Condorcet in his *Éloge de Benjamin Franklin* (delivered in 1790) thusly: "dans sa jeunesse, il avait porté le pirrhonisme jusques sur les fondemens de la morale... Plus tard, il reconnut qu'il existait une morale fondée sur la nature de l'homme, indépendante de toutes les opinions spéculatives."<sup>29</sup> As with the stylized Montaigne of those French Enlightenment thinkers into whose midst Franklin would plunge – Voltaire, Diderot, Marmontel, Mirabeau and others – Franklin's early skepticism was not seen as a barrier to his status as a great philosopher and moralist.<sup>30</sup>

Franklin went to France in an official diplomatic role as the bloody American Revolution unfolded, with the goal of currying French favor to intervene against the British. By this point he had jettisoned his youthful skepticism, and evolved into a larger than life intellectual figure. Condorcet's description in his *Éloge* captures what it was about Franklin that made him fit for this role at such a crucial moment when the United States was fighting for its place in the world of sovereign nations. Franklin was

le seul home de l'Amérique qui eût alors en Europe une grande réputation. Ne pouvant, dans leur heureuse égalité, et au moment de leur naissance politique, envoyer un ambassadeur décoré aux yeux des préjugés par quelques-uns des hochets de la vanité Européene... ils choisirent un homme qui n'était grand qu'aux yeux de la raison et illustre par son génie.<sup>31</sup>

Franklin, Condorcet goes on to explain, was welcomed with acclaim and immediately integrated into elite intellectual circles: "A son arrivée, il devint un objet de vénération pour tous les homes éclairés... Chaque fête qu'il voulait bien recevoir, chaque maison où il consentait d'aller, répandait dans la société de nouveaux admirateurs qui devenait autant des partisans de la révolution Américaine."<sup>32</sup>

Montaigne would no doubt have been an element of conversation among those Franklin frequented, whether over lunch or dinner, at various salons, or

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, *Éloge de M. Franklin* (Paris: Chez Pyre, 1791), 37.

<sup>30</sup> Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Franklin and His French Contemporaries* (New York University Press, 1957), 213-234.

<sup>31</sup> Condorcet, *Éloge*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

perhaps during a game of chess that Franklin so enjoyed playing. His companions might have read Montaigne's *Essais*, read passages that quoted Montaigne in the works of others, or heard him quoted in conversation. Montaigne had become, at this point in French philosophical circles, a philosopher who was venerated.<sup>33</sup> In the words of Voltaire, whom Franklin met on a few memorable occasions: "Le charment projet de Montagne[sic] a eu de peindre naïvement, comme il a fait! Car il a peint la nature humaine [...]. [Celui qui] est savant dans un siècle d'ignorance, philosophe parmi les fanatiques et qui peint sous son nom nos faiblesses et nos folies, est un homme qui sera toujours aimé."<sup>34</sup>

Franklin's knowledge of Montaigne would have proven useful to maintaining his aura as an *objet de vénération*, and thus indirectly facilitate his political role. We have already spoken of his correspondence with Madame Brillon. In addition to prose that embodied the spirit of Montaigne, they sometimes exchanged news about the events in America.<sup>35</sup> And in one letter dated from 1784, she asked Franklin for a French translation of his "Remarks concerning the Savages of North America (c.1783).<sup>36</sup> The text was circulated among Franklin's inner circle, and was translated and printed in French. The opening line paraphrases a passage from "Of Cannibals" that would no doubt have been familiar to his French audience: "Savages we call them, because their Manners differ from ours, which we think the Perfection of Civility. They think the same of theirs."<sup>37</sup> The text continues by painting a picture of noble savages, content in nature to live according to their basic needs. Franklin then loosely paraphrases a passage in "Of Coaches" in which Montaigne has the Mexicans listen to, and reject, the evangelizing propositions of the invading Spanish (III, 6, 175 [III, 6, 911]). Franklin modifies the context to his political era, while borrowing from Montaigne the rhetorical device of criticizing European society through the voice of the Indians:

We are convinc'd therefore that you mean to do us Good by your Proposal, and we thank you heartily. But you who are wise must know, that different Nations have different Conceptions of Things, and you will therefore not take it amiss if our Ideas of this kind of Education happen not to be the same with yours... We are however not the less obliged by your kind Offer, tho'

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<sup>33</sup> Maturin Dréano, *La Renommée de Montaigne en France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: 1677-1802* (Angers: Éditions de l'Ouest, 1952).

<sup>34</sup> François Marie Aroue Voltaire, "Remarque sur les Pensées de M. Pascal," in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*. 92 vols. (Kehl: Imprimerie de la Société Littéraire Typographique, 1785); vol. 40, 413.

<sup>35</sup> For example: "From Benjamin Franklin to Jacques and Anne-Louise Brillon de Jouy, 30 October 1781," "Founders Online, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-35-02-0515>; "From Benjamin Franklin to Madame Brillon, 12 December 1781," Founders Online, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-36-02-0165>.

<sup>36</sup> "Benjamin Franklin to Madame Brillon, 8 April 1784," unpublished; available at [franklinpapers.org/framedVolumes.jsp](http://franklinpapers.org/framedVolumes.jsp).

<sup>37</sup> Compare to Montaigne, *Essays*, at I,30,287 [1,31,205].

we decline accepting it; and to show our grateful Sense of it, if the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their Sons, we will take great Care of their Education, instruct them in all we know, and make *Men* of them.<sup>38</sup>

The political intent of Franklin's pamphlet remains unclear. Some suggest it was part of his late life musings about the difference of cultures, with his reading of Montaigne offering a lens through which to revisit his own experiences with native tribes.<sup>39</sup> Franklin may have portrayed the Indians in this way to counter the negative images of America, notably by Buffon, whose theories in *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* about the inferiority of the New World were a popular topic of conversation (Franklin owned the first four volumes);<sup>40</sup> or the ideas of Cornelius de Pauw, whose *Recherches sur les Américains* not only paints a picture of the ignoble savage who lacks perfectability, but of the American continent as a land of depravity (Franklin had volume 1 in his library). With the United States on the verge of entering the stage of civilized nations, Franklin gave an alternative, albeit stylized, view of America and its inhabitants from someone who had actually lived there.

We can only speculate on other times in which Franklin might have made use of his knowledge of Montaigne, but opportunities he surely did have. A few years after arriving in France, Franklin was invited to attend the events of the Masonic lodge of the Neuf Soeurs. The Neuf Soeurs was envisioned "comme une espèce de colonie des arts, où l'homme qui les cultive est admis, de quelque nation qu'il puisse être, où l'on voit accourir de tous les pays de l'Europe des hommes que leurs talents, leurs lumières, leurs productions rendent chers à leur propre patrie."<sup>41</sup> Franklin famously attended the event held after Voltaire's death, and became a member himself. A later account of the Neuf Soeurs emphasizes Franklin's intellectual renown:

Des noms fameux sont venus se joindre au grand nom de Voltaire et enrichir le catalogue des Neuf Sœurs. Nous vîmes bientôt accourir au milieu de nous cet homme célèbre, ami du grand homme que nous regrettons, ce philosophe que le monde ancien envia longtemps au monde nouveau; qui sut déconcerter à la fois les effrayants mystères de la nature et de la politique; utile à l'univers entier par ses travaux, protecteur et législateur de sa patrie par son courage et ses lumières.<sup>42</sup>

Franklin was soon chosen as *Vénérable*. The first event held under his reign in 1779, which he unfortunately was unable to attend, included a reading of "un

<sup>38</sup> Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, 331.

<sup>39</sup> Timothy J. Shannon, "Benjamin Franklin and Native Americans," in *A Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. David Waldstreicher (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2011), 175-76.

<sup>40</sup> Aldridge, *Franklin and His French Contemporaries*, 188.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Louis Aimable, *Une loge maçonnique d'avant 1789: la R. L. Les neuf sœurs* (Paris: Ancienne Librairie Germer Baillièrre & Cie, 1897), 39.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

*Éloge de Montaigne* [sic] par l'infatigable La Dixmerie."<sup>43</sup>

Nicolas Bricaire de la Dixmerie divided his *Éloge* into two parts: "Montaigne Philosophe dans les ecrits" and "Montaigne Philosophe dans sa conduite." In a passage that sums up how he conceived of Montaigne, La Dixmerie writes: Montaigne was "un homme qui, en détaillant ce qu'il est, apprendrait à ces sémbables ce qe'ils sont, qui les instruirait dans cette science connue si tard, & portant si nécessaire, La Morale."<sup>44</sup> The event corresponded to the time when Franklin borrowed several volumes of Montaigne from Madame Brillon. Without written records, we are left to imagine the discussions Franklin may have had about Montaigne in the context of this event, either before or after.

Franklin was almost certainly exposed to similar ideas in conversations with Henriette Bourdic-Viot, whose literary talents were praised by Voltaire. We know from the few extant letters that she revered Franklin as a philosopher and that they frequented each other often while she was in Paris in 1783.<sup>45</sup> It is likely no coincidence that she also wrote her own *Éloge de Montaigne*, probably composed in 1782 and certainly in circulation prior to 1784. For Bourdic-Viot, Montaigne was a model to live by:

C'est dans la lecture des écrits de Montaigne que j'ai cherché la connoissance de mes devoirs, et c'est à l'histoire de ses actions que j'ai dû cet enthousiasme qui rend l'homme capable de tout entreprendre, parce qu'il lui cache l'intervalle immense qui le sépare de son modèle. Je parlerai donc de ses ouvrages et de ses vertus.<sup>46</sup>

Her portrait of Montaigne signals out his status as a Philosopher whose skepticism served to clear the way for better understanding what it meant to be human: "Personne n'a plus de droit que lui au nom de Philosophe, puisqu'aucun écrivain n'a montré un désir plus vif d'éclairer ses semblables, et n'a contribué plus que lui, à l'anéantissement de leurs préjugés, source trop féconde de nos vices et de nos erreurs."<sup>47</sup>

And finally, Montaigne was a moralist, or at least the precursor to all that her contemporary moralists would produce. Importantly, his ideas made it possible for them to write their treatises on education that would form the new generation of citizens: "C'est donc à Montaigne que nous devons en partie l'amour que les moralistes nous ont inspiré pour la vertu: nous lui devons aussi presque tout ce que nous admirons dans leurs traités sur l'éducation."<sup>48</sup>

These *Éloges* recast Montaigne as a moralist, painting over what earlier

<sup>43</sup> Aimiable, *Une loge*, 146.

<sup>44</sup> Nicolas Bricaire de la Dixmerie, *Éloge analytique et historique de Michel Montaigne* (Amsterdam: Chez Valleyre l'ainé, 1781), 10.

<sup>45</sup> Gilbert Chinard, "Benjamin Franklin et la muse provinciale," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 97-5 (1953): 493-510, 498.

<sup>46</sup> Henriette Bourdic-Viot, *Éloge de Montaigne* (Paris: Charles Pougens, An VIII), 8.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

critics called his libertinism and anti-Christian values. That Franklin was almost certainly exposed to these ideas suggests that understanding Franklin's relationship to Montaigne requires more than simply understanding his reading of the *Essais*. Rather, Franklin would have also been attuned to Montaigne's life as a model of a new-fangled, more corporeal, more honest and ultimately imperfect, virtue that was free from the religious dogma of the past. The portrait of Montaigne in these *Éloges* paints a very specific view of Montaigne – the Montaigne of the Enlightenment, whose ideas and actions were placed on a pedestal. His philosophy and his life were worthy of praise and emulation.

Franklin's own self-portraiture would arguably follow a similar pattern.

### Emulating Montaigne the Man

Franklin did not attend the 1779 meeting of the Neufs Soeurs at which Dixmerie's "Éloge de Montagne" was read. But he was there in spirit. Among the additional intellectual pieces presented that celebrated great men was an *Éloge* of the recently deceased Voltaire and the "préface d'un ouvrage d'Hilliard d'Auberteuil, intitulé *Essais historiques et politiques sur les Anglo-Américains*, où l'auteur avait tracé les portraits des principaux chefs de la nouvelle confédération, entre autres celui de Franklin, ce qui donnait lieu de célébrer le chef de la loge."<sup>49</sup> The pairing of Montaigne and Franklin as men to be celebrated raises questions about what they might have had in common as *philosophers*.

The secondary literature on Franklin is conflicted as to whether he had a coherent philosophical project. Some scholars suggest he underwent a philosophical turn, from skeptic to commonsense moral philosopher in search of attainable truths about human happiness, with the art of self-examination being his single most important teaching.<sup>50</sup> Others argue that despite appearances to the contrary, he intended from his earliest essays and pithy writings through his *Autobiography* that he worked on until his death—first published posthumously in French in 1791 – to teach people how to live. Behind the masks of his playful and often conflicting writings lies a deep process of self-examination that reveals an artful account of human life.<sup>51</sup> Through a style best classified as meandering and provocative – in the words of Condorcet "il employait ces formes qui ne déguisent en apparence la vérité que pour la rendre plus sensible, et, au lieu de l'apprendre, laisser le plaisir de la deviner" – Franklin revealed an imperfect picture of himself that challenged reigning religious dogmas and provided a model for ordinary people to

<sup>49</sup> Aimiable, *Une loge*, 146.

<sup>50</sup> Kevin Slack, *Benjamin Franklin, Natural Right, and the Art of Virtue* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2017), 5; 208-14.

<sup>51</sup> Jerry Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), xv.

emulate.<sup>52</sup> Pairing Franklin with Montaigne suggests that neither a purposeful philosophic turn nor continuity is the key to unlocking his purposeful self-examination; rather, through the act of depicting the contradictions, vicissitudes and imperfections of our nature across a lifetime, Franklin, like Montaigne, teaches us how to live.

In Franklin's life, the *Essais* had the reputation of being the gentleman's book of choice. Beginning with the third edition of Cotton's English translation (1700), an essay entitled "A Vindication of Montaigne's Essays" prefaced the actual essays. As the anonymous author exclaims: "People of all Qualities [extoll] these Essays above all the Books that ever they read, and they make them their chief Study [...]. [they] are very effectual to cure Men of the Weakness and Vanity, and induce them to seek Virtue and Felicity by lawful means."<sup>53</sup> The "enemies" of Montaigne – Malebranche and Balzac among others – criticized Montaigne for being ignorant of philosophy, science and theology, and for ultimately not instilling men with virtue. Rather, he was seen as steering them to vice with licentious words that led them away from true religion. Yet our anonymous author disagreed:

[T]here is hardly any humane Book extant, so fit as this to teach Men what they are, and lead them insensibly to a reasonable Observation of the most secret Springs of their Actions; and therefore it ought to be the manuale of all Gentlemen, his uncommon way of teaching, winning People to the Practice of Virtue, as much as other Books fright them away from it, by the dogmatical and imperious way which they assume.<sup>54</sup>

The *Essais* were thus a book one read to understand who one was, and ultimately to help form one's moral character. We find a similar theme in Franklin's most famous work, the *Autobiography*.

While the 1797-1798 French edition drew a parallel with Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), the parallels with Montaigne, whose self-exploration was a precursor to Rousseau and arguably more akin to Franklin's own musings, should not be ignored.<sup>55</sup> The *Autobiography* takes the form of a letter to Franklin's son in which he promises to expose the "Circumstances of *my* life." He imagines these are things that "my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, & therefore fit to be imitated." He goes on to add:

That Felicity, when I reflected on it, has induc'd me sometimes to say, that were it offer'd to my Choice, I should have no Objection to a Repetition of

<sup>52</sup> Condorcet, *Éloge*, 38.

<sup>53</sup> Anonymous, "A Vindication of Montaigne's Essays" in Michel de Montaigne, *Essays of Michael Seigneur de Montaigne in Three Books*, trans. Charles Cotton, (London: 1711), vol. 1, 1.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>55</sup> Michel Guggenheim, "Des 'Essais' aux 'Confessions': Deux écrivains devant leur moi," *The French Review* 34-6 (1961): 517-524.

the same Life from its Beginning, only asking the Advantage Authors have in a second Edition to correct some Faults of the first. So would I if I might, besides corr[ectin]g the Faults, change some sinister Accidents and Events of it for others more favourable, but tho' this were deny'd, I should still accept the Offer.<sup>56</sup>

The reader will recall the passage quoted above from the *Logic Or the Art of Thinking*, in which Montaigne was criticized for, despite recognizing his faults, claiming that he would happily live his life exactly the same again. While Franklin does admit to some of his “errata” that he would want to correct, these are not the vices the critics of Montaigne chastised.

The *Autobiography* is a rich and meandering text. Franklin's paradoxical recognition of his imperfection—“I never arrived at the Perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it”—falls in stark contrast with the desire to portray his attempts as worthy of emulation.<sup>57</sup> His discussion of the virtues in Part 2 parallels, in broad strokes, Montaigne's wide ranging meditation on virtue and the body. But it is his desire to be seen as a model to be emulated that places him on the same pedestal of the Montaigne of the *Éloges*. Hence his inclusion in the *Autobiography* of a letter by Benjamin Vaughn (1783) in which Vaughn extolls Franklin as just such an exemplar: “I do not think that the writings of Caesar and Tacitus can be more interesting to a true judge of human nature and society...If it encourages more writings of the same kind with your own, and induces more men to spend lives fit to be written; it will be worth all Plutarch's Lives put together.”<sup>58</sup> Franklin's life, as seen from the outside, was thus a subject worthy of the very same Plutarch that Montaigne lauded in “Of Coaches”: “[O]f all the Authors I ever convers'd with, is he who has best mix'd *Art* with *Nature*, and *Judgment* with *Knowledge*” (III, 6, 156 [III, 6, 899]).

## Conclusion

Franklin read Montaigne and used the Frenchman's ideas without acknowledging their source in his own writings. He was exposed to critiques and praise of Montaigne and his ideas, no doubt sharing his own thoughts in undocumented conversations. And finally, he left a written self-portrait of a man of imperfect virtue who ought to be emulated by others. There is, thus, a deep connection between the two thinkers that spans Franklin's youth to his final years as U.S. ambassador to France.

While Franklin was influenced by many other writers, Montaigne was a thinker whose ideas he returned to late in life to contemplate the pleasures and pains of his own existence, the diversity of nations at a time when his own nation was being born, and the contradictions of the human condition. A letter written to Joseph Priestly on 7 June 1782, which paraphrases a passage

<sup>56</sup> Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 59; 62.

from “On Some Verses of Virgil” (III, 5, 128 [III, 5, 878]), captures these philosophical synergies. In the letter, a pensive and melancholic Franklin shows signs of losing hope in humanity after having witnessing so much violence during the American Revolution. Let an aging Franklin imbued with Montaigne have the final words:

Men I find to be a Sort of Being very badly constructed, as they are generally more easily provok'd than reconcil'd, more disposed to do Mischief to each other than to make Reparation, much more easily deceiv'd than undeceiv'd, and having more Pride and Pleasure in killing than in begetting one another; for without a Blush they assemble in great armies at NoonDay to destroy, and when they have kill'd as many as they can, they exaggerate the Number to augment the fancied Glory; but they creep into Corners, or cover themselves with the Darkness of night, when they mean to beget, as being asham'd of a virtuous Action. A virtuous Action it would be, and a vicious one the killing of them, if the Species were really worth producing or preserving; but of this I begin to doubt.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “From Benjamin Franklin to Joseph Priestley, 7 June 1782,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-37-02-0277>; Newcomb, “Benjamin Franklin and Montaigne,” 489.