Order in Disorder

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We recall that “De l’amitié” (I: 28), which immediately precedes the central chapter of Book One and serves to introduce it, begins with an account of how an artist decorated the walls of Montaigne’s chateau with a noble example of his best work in the middle of each one, and filled the surrounding space with grotesques. We recall as well that he likens his Essays to those symmetrical decorations and said that since he could produce nothing good enough to put in the middle he would put his departed friend Etienne de la Boétie’s Discours de la servitude volontaire there instead. Until the last pages of I: 28 he leads us to believe that the chapter to follow this one would be that text, and that it would form the center of his book. But just before the end something odd occurs. Immediately after he invites us to read the Discours—“Mais oions un peu parler ce garson de dixhuict ans” [But let us listen a little to this eighteen-year-old boy speak] (I: 28: 194a, DM 273r; 144*)—a line of three asterisks appears (in the 1580 edition), followed by the statement that because he has discovered that the Discours
has already been published, and with malign intent, “je me suis dedit de le loger icy” [I have renounced placing it here] (I: 28, 194a, DM 273; 144*). He was alluding to certain Protestants, who had indeed published some of the *Discours* in 1574, and then all of it in 1576, bound together with some really incendiary pamphlets, as an incitement to murder the French Catholic king. He then devotes about two hundred words to exculpating La Boétie from any Protestant or regicidal leanings, after which he informs us that he has just received twenty-nine sonnets by the same author, a manuscript of whose existence he was apparently unaware—for the man who sent them had found them by chance (“par fortune”) among some papers—and that he will substitute them for the *Discours*. It would appear that for at least a brief moment—the time represented perhaps by the three asterisks, and the words of exculpation—he was going to leave the place vacant, for he says that the sonnets had only just come into his possession. In other words, if Poiffrère had only just sent them, it would seem that they arrived after he had already decided not to publish the *Discours*, and clearly he wishes us to believe that he arrived at the decision to remove it independently of the sonnets’ coming to light. If the sonnets showed up after Montaigne had decided, and then reneged, on having the *Discours* be the middle, was that middle going to be the twenty-ninth chapter anyway—the middle of fifty-seven?

And how do we account for the fact that Montaigne pretends he has just discovered that the Protestants kidnapped the *Discours* when he must have known about it for four years if not six? Villey, who tried to date every chapter, was hard put to account for this contradiction without suggesting that “De l’amitié” was an incoherent piece of work: “We can therefore say, without being able to be more precise, that the first part is anterior to 1576, the second posterior to that date” (Villey’s edition of the *Essais*, 183). In other words, Montaigne didn’t bother to correct the first part of the chapter to bring it in line with the second—or more importantly, with the truth.

Richard Regosin put the question this way: “Why did he choose not to modify his opening remarks by explaining his change of mind? . . . Clearly the impact on the reader of this unrealized expectation”—that the *Discours de la servitude volontaire* would soon appear—“derives from the internal disposition of the essay, for the parallel between its culmination in the absence of both the friend and his work is too striking to be gratuitous.”¹ Yves Delègue asks the same question: “This change of stage directions surprises: the pirated edition of the *Contre Un* took place in 1574, in part, and then in

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1576, in totality. Why does Montaigne pretend to discover the theft at the last minute? Why does he keep the preamble where he defines his project, instead of deleting or modifying it?" (Montaigne et la mauvaise foi, 60).

François Rigolot casts doubt as well on Montaigne’s assertion that he was intending to put the Discours there:

Montaigne decided to honor his friend’s memory by placing this booklet in the best spot . . . of his first volume of essays. Or, rather, this is what he says he decided to do, borrowing a “rich, artistic picture” from La Boétie and filling the space around it with poor, artless “grotesques,” namely his “essays.” . . . For the “masterpiece in the center” simile does not seem to function too well when we look closely at the text. . . . Montaigne tells us that La Boétie wrote his political discourse “par maniere d’essay.” . . . This is indeed a curious way to refer to the “masterpiece.”

Not only does the promise to give us the Discours coexist with the declaration “je me suis dédit de le loger icy,” but even in the first part of the chapter, when he is still making that promise, he lets slip that the sonnets are coming: “Sous cete parfaicte amitié ces affections volages ont autrefois trouvé place ches moy: affin que je ne parle de luy, qui n’en confesse que trop par ses vers” [Beneath this perfect friendship those fleeting affections have sometimes found a place in me, not to speak of him, who confesses only too many of them in his verses] (I: 28, 186a, DM 260; 137*). Balsamo et al. take note of the contradiction: “Montaigne is already alluding here to the twenty-nine love sonnets . . . yet he was claiming a few pages earlier that he was going to give us the Discours de la servitude volontaire” (1413). Stranger still, in the 1588 edition Montaigne would change “ses vers” [his verses] to “ces vers” [these verses], making it even clearer that he was alluding to the poems he was about to present even though at this point in the chapter he was still pretending that he was about to present the Discours.

2. The author of a recent book on Montaigne for the general reader, alluding to the seeming awkwardness of the last-minute replacement of the Discours by the sonnets and then to the eventual disappearance of the latter, remarks: “One entire chapter, number 29 in Book I, became a double deletion: a ragged stub or hole which Montaigne deliberately refused to disguise. He even drew attention to its frayed edges. It is odd behavior, and has inspired a lot of speculation. Was Montaigne simply adding and subtracting material in a fluster, without bothering to tidy up the results, or was he trying to alert us to something?” Sarah Blakewell, How to Live: Or, a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer (New York: Other Press, 2010), 99.


4. Incomprehensibly, although the Villey edition, reflecting the 1588 change, has “ces” the University of Chicago on-line text at http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/montaigne/index.
Although the sonnets of I: 29 appeared in all editions of the *Essais* published in his lifetime, Montaigne crossed them out on the Bordeaux Copy and wrote “Ces vers se voient ailleurs” [These verses may be seen elsewhere] (I: 29, 196c; 145). Where else could they have been seen (apart from the earlier editions)? Marie de Gournay replaced that statement by this one: “Ces vingt neuf sonnetz d’Estienne de la Boëtie qui estoient mis en ce lieu ont esté imprimez avec ses oeuvres” [These twenty-nine sonnets of Estienne de la Boëtie which had been put in this place have been printed with his works] (Balsamo et al., 202). Balsamo et al. provide this note: “Mlle de Gournay is perhaps alluding to the publication of the *Histoire description du solitaire et sauvage pays de Médoc*, published in 1593 in Bordeaux by S. Millanges, which may have included these twenty-nine sonnets, but which today is lost (a copy was supposedly seen in 1765 in abbé Desbiey’s library)” (1420). Until recently, scholars of Montaigne have almost ignored them, or have been more interested in La Boétie as the author of the *Discours de la servitude volontaire*. The sonnets are nowhere to be found in Pierre Villey’s otherwise careful edition of the *Essais*, nor were they translated by either Donald Frame nor M. A. Screech. Neither Donald Frame nor M. A. Screech translate them; in fact they have to my knowledge never appeared in English except once, in an out-of-print translation by Louis How in 1915.

Their relative neglect is not surprising since (1) they are apparently not by the author of the *Essays*, (2) Montaigne leads us to believe that they were his second choice for I: 29, and (3) he marked them out on the Bordeaux Copy. In addition, as Philippe Desan points out, Montaigne never corrected what seems to have been a printing error dating from the first edition that on the title page of I: 29 numbered that chapter as the “vintdieziesme” [twenty-eighth] (DM 275). In that same 1580 edition, the heading for “De la moderat” (I: 30) gave it as the “vintneufiesme” (DM 293) and “Des cannibales”

html has “ses”—even though the same site’s photograph of the relevant page from the Bordeaux Copy (the 1588 edition) clearly shows “ces.” Balsamo et al. give “ses,” with no explanation, and no indication of the changes this word underwent.


(I: 31) as the “trentième” [thirtieth] (DM 298). The error finally stopped at that point, “Qu’il faut sobrement se meler de juger des ordonnances divines” being correctly numbered as the “trentedeuxième” [thirty-second] (DM 329). On the corresponding chapter title pages of the 1582 edition the error is corrected for I: 30 and I: 31 but not for I: 29. That error persists in the 1588 edition. Desan concludes that this “casts a doubt on the thesis that makes of chapter 29 the center or the heart of the first book of the Essais.” Yet I: 29 is correctly listed in the table of contents in every edition during Montaigne’s lifetime (even I: 30 and I: 31 were correctly numbered there in 1580). Desan dismisses the significance of the table of contents:

As for the famous table of contents invoked by critics, it was at that time, as it is today, created after the printing of the rest of the book. A Renaissance author furnished neither a table of contents, nor an index, nor a glossary. Those paratextual tools were entirely created by the printer-booksellers. One should not grant too much importance to the numbering followed in the table of contents. (54)

This is in part a straw-man argument: we aren’t talking about indexes or glossaries. And to argue that Montaigne did not draw up the table of contents (or at least did not supply its page numbers) is not the same as to prove that he didn’t know there were tables of contents in his books and that they gave I: 29 as I: 29.

Yet there is definitely something strange going on, just as strange as Montaigne pretending he was going to give his reader the Discours de la servitude volontaire when he knew he wasn’t. Book One’s 29th chapter both is (in the tables of contents) and isn’t (on the chapter’s title page) there. The same is true of the sonnets, which were (he claims) neither his first choice nor his last (because he marked them out of the Bordeaux Copy). At first they were not yet there, then they were, and then they were there no longer.

Their eventual disappearance is, curiously, anticipated by their own narrative. For the poet, the speaker of the poems, wants at one moment to make their own center disappear. Although the sequence for the most part expresses a lover’s praise for his beloved, the two central sonnets, 14 and 15, do not. In them he charges his beloved with infidelity. In sonnet 16 he retracts his accusation and tries to make amends (sonnets 16–20 constituting a palinode) for his outburst. 8

7. Philippe Desan, Montaigne dans tous ses états (Fasano, Italy: Schena editore, 2001), 43.
8. An outburst similar to the vituperative “Chanson” included among those Montaigne published in 1571. In sonnet 16 of the 29, the speaker says “je me desdiray” of the two offending sonnets
O coeur leger, o courage mal seur,
Penses tu plus que souffrir je te puisse?
O bonté creuze, o couverte malice,
Traître beauté, venimeuse douceur.
Tu estois donc toujours soeur de ta soeur?
Et moy trop simple il failloit que j’en fisse
L’essay sur moy? & que tard j’entendisse
Ton parler double & tes chantz de chasseur?
Depuis le jour que j’ay prins à t’aider,
J’eusse vaincu les vagues de la mer.
Qu’est ce meshuy que je pourrois attendre?
Comment de toy pourrois j’estre content?
Qui apprendra ton coeur d’estre constant,
Puis que le mien ne le luy peut apprendre?

Ce n’est pas moy que l’on abuze ainsi:
Qu’à quelque enfant ses ruzes on emploie,
Qui n’a nul goust, qui n’entend rien qu’il oye:
Je scay aymer, je scay hayr aussi.
Contente toi de m’avoir jusqu’ici
Fermé les yeux, il est temps que j’y voie:
Et que meshui, las & honteux je soy
D’avoir mal mis mon temps & mon souci.
Osereois tu m’ayant ainsi traicté
Parler à moi jamais de fermeté?
Tu prendz plaisir à ma douleur extreme:
Tu me defends de sentir mon tourment:
Et si veux bien que je meure en t’aimant.
Si je ne sens, comment veux tu que j’aime?

O l’ai je dict? helas l’ai je songé?
Ou si pour vrai j’ai je dict blaspheme telle?
Ça faulce langue, il faut que l’honner d’elle

14 and 15; in the “Chanson” he says he will “[se] desdire” of all the poems he had previously written in praise of the beloved. Unsaying was already a theme in La Boétie’s œuvre, and Montaigne would have known that. *Oeuvres complètes d’Estienne de La Boétie*, ed. Louis Desgraves (Bordeaux: William Blake, 1991), vol. 2, 114.
De moi, par moi, desus moi, soit vangé.
Mon coeur chez toi, O madame, est logé:
   Là donne lui quelque geine nouvelle:
   Fis lui souffrir quelque peine cruelle:
   Fais, fais lui tout, fors lui donner congé.
Or seras tu (je le sçais) trop humaine,
   Et ne pourras longuement voir ma peine.
Mais un tel fait, faut il qu’il se pardonne?
A tout le moings hault je me desdiray
   De mes sonnetz, & me desmentiray,
   Pour ces deux faux, cinq cent vrais je t’en donne.

O fickle heart! O uncertain virtue!
   Do you imagine that I could bear more?
O hollow kindness! O covert malice,
   Treasonous beauty, sweetness envenomed!
And so you were your sister’s sister still?
And I, too simple, had to try it out
   Upon myself, and all too late would hear
   Your double speech and your songs of the hunt?
Since the day that I started to love you
   I would have conquered the waves of the sea,
But from now on what can I hope to gain?
   How could I ever be happy with you?
   Who could ever teach your heart constancy,
   When mine was such a failure at that task?

I’m not a man to suffer such abuse—
   Try out those ruses on some ignorant child,
   Who, artless, takes in nothing that he hears.
I know how to love, I know how to hate.
Content yourself with having until now
   Kept shut my eyes, for it is time I saw:
   And time as well, alas, that I, in shame,
   Regret such ill-spent use of time and care.
Would you dare then, in light of what you’ve done,
   Entreat me now to have a steadfast heart?
My bitter sorrow seems to you delight.
IV. Journey to the Center of the Book

You even tell me not to feel my pain,
And then want me to die of loving you.
If I can’t feel, why think you I could love?

Did I say that? Alas! Was it a dream?
Or did in fact I speak such blasphemy?
For that, false tongue, my lady’s honor must
Be by me, through me, over me, avenged.

My heart, belovèd, within you is lodged.
There find some novel torture to inflict;
Make it to suffer cruelly some pain;
Do, do unto it all save give it rest.

But you will be (I know this) too humane,
Unable long to watch my suffering.

But can a crime like mine seek clemency?
The least that I can do is to unsay
These guilty sonnets, which I’ll now recant:
For these two false I’ll write five hundred true.

In microcosm, the sonnets predict their own demise: “je me desdiray / De mes sonnetz” [I will unsay / My sonnets]. Montaigne unsaid the sonnets on the Bordeaux Copy, as he literally unsaid the Discours they replaced in writing “je me suis dedit de le loger icy” (I: 28, 194a, DM 273; 144). He may even have toyed with the idea of repeating in the middle of the sonnets the same error he allowed to persist in the numbering of his central chapter, for in the 1582 edition, which corrected so many of the printer’s errors of the first, sonnet XIII, correctly numbered that way in 1580, becomes a second sonnet XIII (1582, 173). It became sonnet XIII again in 1588.

The poet’s attempt at erasure in sonnet 16 was anticipated in a different context in sonnet 8: “Maulgré moy je t’escris, maulgré moy je t’efface” [Despite myself I write you, despite myself I efface you] (line 5). He was speaking of his desire to name his beloved before the world:

Quand viendra ce jour la, que ton nom au vray passe
Par France, dans mes vers? combien & quantesfois
S’en empresser mon coeur, s’en demangent mes doits?
Souvent dans mes escris de soy mesme il prend place.

[When will that day come, when your name will truly pass
Through France, in my verse? How often and how much}
Does my heart race ahead, my fingers itch to write?
Many times in my verse on its own it appears.] (sonnet 8, lines 1–4)

But “Maulgré moy je t’escris, maulgré moy je t’efface” is also what Montaigne could have been saying to his late friend, who on his death bed famously begged him “de luy donner une place” [to give him a place]. And when Montaigne seemed not to understand: “mon frere, me refusez-vous doncques une place?” [my brother, are you then refusing me a place?]. He gave him a place, but then he took it away.

The poet in sonnet 16 promises to write five hundred more to recant the preceding two; he actually writes five, this one and the four that follow. They constitute a palinode, anticipated by an allusion in sonnet 9 to the *locus classicus* of the genre, Stesichorus’ recantation of his attack on Helen:

Mesme race porta l’amitié souveraine
Des bons jumeaux, desquelz l’un à l’autre despart
Du ciel & de l’enfer la moitié de sa part,
Et l’amour diffamé de la trop belle Heleine.

[From the same race sprang forth the sovereign friendship
Of the good twins of whom each to the other gave
Of heaven and of hell the half of his portion;
And the slandered love of the too beauteous Helen.] (sonnet 9, lines 11–14)

The twins are Castor and Pollux, who avenged their sister Helen by blinding Stesichorus for writing that Helen had been a willing abductee. Socrates tells that story in the *Phaedrus*:

Now for such as offend in speaking of gods and heroes there is an ancient mode of purification, which was known to Stesichorus, though not to Homer. When Stesichorus lost the sight of his eyes because of his defama-

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9. Those who believe that Montaigne’s friendship with La Boétie had a homosexual component might find that fourth line intriguing in light of the fact that four out of the six times his name is written in the *Essays* it is spelled la Boitie, notably in “De l’amitié” (183a; also: I: 26, 156b; II: 17, 659a; III: 12, 1057c) combined with Montaigne’s comment on the proverb “celuy-là ne cognoit pas Venus en sa parfaicte douceur qui n’a couché avec la boitice” [he does not know Venus in her perfect sweetness who has not lain with a cripple] to the effect that it “se dict des masles comme des femelles” [is said of males as well as females] (III: 11, 1033b, DM 458; 791).

tion of Helen, he was not, like Homer, at a loss to know why. As a true artist he understood the reason, and promptly wrote the lines:

False, false the tale,
Thou never didst sail in the well-decked ships
Nor come to the towers of Troy.

And after finishing the composition of his so-called palinode he straightway recovered his sight.\(^\text{11}\)

In *The Republic*, Socrates explains how Stesichorus’ palinode differed from his first version: it wasn’t Helen but her phantom (an *eidolon* that looked just like her) that went off to Troy in the arms of a man who was not her husband: “Stesichorus says the wraith of Helen was fought for at Troy through ignorance of the truth” (814; 586bc). The brothers’ “amitié souveraine” recalls another, the one between Montaigne and La Boétie, described in the same terms in “De l’amitié”: “cette *souveraine* et maistresse amitié” [this *sovereign* and masterful *friendship*] (I: 28, 190b; 140). The formulation “souveraine […] amitié” appears nowhere else in the *Essays*. Its presence here could well have been influenced by its appearance in the sonnet, since it comes from 1588. But an even more striking anticipatory echo had already been in the chapter since 1580: “Nous estions à moitié de tout. Il me semble que je luy desrobe sa part … il me semble n’estre plus qu’à demy” [We went *halves* in everything. It seems to me that I am robbing him of *his share* … only half of me seems to be alive now] (I: 28, 193a, DM 271–72; 143). Montaigne is describing himself and his friend in the language La Boétie had used in sonnet 9, as the brothers who shared “Du ciel & de l’enfer la *moitié* de *sa* *part*” [Of heaven and of hell the *half* of *his share*]. Even though this passage appears when Montaigne is still leading the reader to believe that he is about to present the *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, before he receives the sonnets from Poiferré, it is evident that he had already read sonnet 9 and had decided to borrow the language in which it alludes to Castor and Pollux. The mention in both I: 28 and sonnet 9 of half portions alludes to the peculiar way the twins shared their immortality. Originally Castor was mortal and Pollux immortal. Castor died in battle; his brother wept because, being deathless, he could not follow him to Hades. Touched by such devotion, Zeus allowed Pollux to share his immortality with Castor, each twin living

on alternate days. In describing his friendship with La Boétie in “De la vanité,” Montaigne enlarges this parallel in saying that they were more fully friends when they were not in the same place at the same time, as was the case with the Dioscuri: “Nous remplissions mieux et estandions la possession de la vie en nous separant : il vivoit, il jouissoit, il voyoit pour moy, et moy pour luy, autant plainement que s’il y eust esté. . . . La separation du lieu rendoit la conjonction de nos volontez plus riche” [We filled and extended our possession of life better by separating; he lived, he enjoyed, he saw for me, and I for him, as fully as if he had been there. . . . Separation in space made the conjunction of our wills richer] (III: 9, 977b; 746–47).

Françoise Charpentier suggests that Montaigne might have already had the sonnets in hand before he received a copy of them from Poiferré. In introducing them in I: 29, he addresses Madame de Grammont, “la belle Corisande” (later the mistress of Henri de Navarre), and promises he will some day whisper in her ear who it was they were written for. He tells her that the 29 were written earlier and are hotter (“plus bouillant”) than the 25, which La Boétie wrote for his wife, Marguerite de Carle, and which are redolent of a certain “froideur maritale” [marital coolness] (I: 29, 196a, DM 277; 145). Charpentier comments: “Might Montaigne not have had in his possession and kept secret for the sake of decency, or out of regard for Marguerite de Carle, this collection of sonnets, whether M. de Poiferré later gave him a copy or not?” She then advances the hypothesis that the 29 might have been written after La Boétie married Marguerite de Carle, and recount an adulterous affair carried out during the marriage. All the more reason, she adds, for Montaigne to have kept them out of the 1571 collection of his friend’s poems.

Whether he had them earlier or not, we already saw him signaling they were in his possession when he alluded to them as “ses vers” (and in 1588 as “ces vers”) near the beginning of “De l’amitié.” His repeating the terms of sonnet 9 in those two other passages of “De l’amitié” not only signals their existence but is evidence of the sonnets’ presence in the Essays beyond their appearance in I: 29.

The immortality-sharing twins figure in the 25 sonnets too. When his beloved falls gravely ill, the poet asks heaven the favor of dying with her:

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Ou s’il est, ce qu’on dit des deux frères d’Hélène,
Que l’un pour l’autre au ciel, & là bas se promene,
Or accomplissez moy une pareille envie.

Ayez, ayez de moy, ayez quelque pitié,
Laissez nous, en l’honneur de ma forte amitié,
Moy mourir de sa mort, ell’ vivre de ma vie.

[Or if it is true what they say of Helen’s two brothers,
That one for the other in heaven and down below wanders,
Then fulfill a similar desire for me.

Have some pity on me.
Allow us, in honor of my strong love,
That I die of her death, and she live with my life.] (sonnet 3, lines 9–14;
Desgraves, vol. 2, 117)

Montaigne, even if he didn’t know the 29 sonnets (though it appears he did),
was familiar with the 25, since he published them in 1571. So he would
have been familiar with the Dioscuri motif in La Boétie. But the connection
between the twins as they are evoked in the 29 sonnets and Montaigne’s text
(that is, “De l’amitié”) is stronger than that between their presence in the 25
and that text (except perhaps for the fact that in the 25 they parallel a pair
of lovers, as Montaigne and La Boétie may have been), for it is based on the
words themselves: “l’amitié souveraine” and “la moitié de sa part.”

In the 29 sonnets, Castor and Pollux find an explicit parallel in the Dor-
dogne and the Vézère, two rivers of contrasting character to which the poet
likens his beloved and her sister. Lacking her permission to name her pub-
licularly, he decides that “tu seras ma Dourdouigne” [you will be my Dordogne]
(sonnets 8, line 10). In sonnet 10, however, we see that these siblings are far
from similar:

Or ne charge donc rien de ta soeur infidele,
    De Vesere ta soeur: elle va s’escartant
    Toujours flotant mal seure, en son cours inconstant.
Voy tu comme à leur gré les vans se jouient d’elle?
Et ne te repent point pour droit de ton aïnage
    D’avoir des-jà choisi la constance en partage.
Mesme race porta l’amitié souveraine
    Des bons jumeaux. . . .
[Now don’t reproach your sister, faithless though she be,
   Vézère your sister river: Wandering she goes,
   Flowing never steady in her inconstant course.
   Can you see how the winds play with her at their whim?
And never regret, as the right of the elder,
   Having picked constancy for your inheritance.
   From the same race sprang forth the sovereign friendship
Of the good twins. . . . ] (sonnet 10, lines 5–12)

This explains the complaint the poet expresses in sonnet 14: “Tu estois donc
tousjours soeur de ta soeur?” [And so you were your sister’s sister still?].
The Dordogne proves to be just as inconstant as the Vézère. Both rivers are part of
a landscape shared by La Boétie and Montaigne. La Boétie’s native Sarlat lies
between the Dordogne and the Vézère; downstream, to the west, Montaigne’s
château is located just north of the Dordogne, some distance after the Vézère
has joined forces with it. More intriguingly, perhaps, in “Des cannibales” (I: 31),
at two chapters’ distance from the sonnets, what for La Boétie was “ma
Dourdouigne” becomes for Montaigne “ma riviere de Dordoigne” [my river
Dordogne] (I: 31, 204b; 151*):

Quand je considère l’impression que ma riviere de Dordoigne fait de mon
temps vers la rive droicte de sa descente, et qu’en vingt ans elle a tant gai-
gné, et desrobé le fondement à plusieurs bastimens, je vois bien que c’est
une agitation extraordinaire: car, si elle fut tousjours allée ce train, ou deut
aller à l’advenir, la figure du monde seroit renversée. Mais il leur prend des
changements: tantost elles s’espendent d’un costé, tantost d’un autre; tan-
tost elles se contiennent.

[When I consider the inroads that my Dordogne river is making in my
lifetime into the right bank in its descent, and that in twenty years it has
gained so much ground and stolen away the foundations of several build-
ings, I clearly see that this is an extraordinary disturbance; for if it had
always gone at this rate, or was to do in the future, the face of the world
would be turned topsy-turvy. But rivers are subject to changes: now they
overflow in one direction, now in another, now they keep to their course.]
(I: 31, 204B; 151*)

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14. Erroneously printed as “seur de ta soeur” in 1580 and 1582, it was corrected to “soeur de ta
soeur” in 1588.
The Dordogne, Montaigne is saying, is inconstant, like any river. It will not always be encroaching on the bank it is attacking now. Sometimes a river will eat away at its right bank, sometimes at its left, sometimes neither. Both Montaigne and La Boétie are saying almost the same thing, that the Dordogne is as inconstant as another river. The only difference is that La Boétie likens its inconstancy to only one other, the Vézère, while Montaigne likens it to all others.

The Dordogne makes another appearance in the *Essays*, in the chapter in Book Two that has the same numerical position as the sonnets, II: 29 (“De la vertu”). And there, as in I: 29 (with the Dordogne and the Vézère), it is a question of two sisters.

Dépuis peu de jours, à Bragerac, à cinq lieues de ma maison, contremont la riviere de Dordoigne, une femme, ayant esté tourmentée et batue, le soir avant, de son mary . . . delibera d’eschapper à sa rudesse au pris de sa vie; et . . . prenant une sienne soeur par la main, la mena avecques elle sur le pont, et, apres avoir prins congé d’elle, comme par maniere de jeu, sans montrer autre changement ou alteration, se precipita du haut en bas dans la riviere, où elle se perdit.

[A few days ago, at Bergerac, five leagues from my house up the Dordogne River, a woman who had been tormented and beaten the night before by her husband . . . resolved to escape his roughness at the price of her life, and . . . taking a sister of hers by the hand, brought her onto the bridge, and, after taking leave of her as if in jest, without showing any other change or alteration, she threw herself down headlong into the river, where she perished.] (II: 29, 706–7a; 534*)

There is no reason to think it didn’t really happen, but we have seen ample evidence of Montaigne’s propensity for taking material at hand, from real events to classical and other texts, and using it for his own artistic purpose, like a *bricoleur* in the Lévi-Straussian sense. The 29 sonnets, despite his claiming they were not his first choice, are part of the fabric of the *Essays*.

The reason the poet gives for keeping the two offending sonnets in the sequence sounds strangely like the reason Montaigne gives in “De l’oisiveté” for writing the *Essays*. Montaigne says he retired from active life and as a favor to his mind let it remain idle, hoping that with time it would become stronger and more mature. But he found that it gave birth to so many chimera and monsters with neither order nor pertinence that “pour en contempler à mon aise l’ineptie & l’estrangetté j’ay commancé de les mettre en rolle, espe-
rant avec le temps luy en faire *honte* à luy mesmes” [in order to contemplate their ineptitude and strangeness at my leisure, I have begun to put them in writing, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself] (I: 8, 33a; DM 32; 21*). The poet writes that sonnets 14 and 15 are the “*honte de mes vers*” [*shame of my verses*] and that if he doesn’t destroy them it is because he wants to make their shortcomings public:

O vous mauditz sonnetz, vous qui prinstes l’audace  
De toucher à ma dame: o malings & pervers,  
Des muses le reproche, & *honte* de mes vers:  
Si je vous feis jamais, il faut que je me fasse  
Ce tort de confesser vous tenir de ma race,

...  
Si j’ai oncq quelque part à la posterité  
Je veux que l’un & l’autre en soit desherité.  
Et si au feu vangeur des or je ne vous donne,  
C’est pour vous diffamer, vivez chetifz, vivez,  
Vivez aux yeux de tous, de tout honneur privez:  
Car c’est pour vous punir, qu’ores je vous pardonne.

[O you, my cursèd sonnets, you who had the nerve  
To do my lady harm! O evil and perverse,  
The reproach of the Muses, the *shame* of my verse!  
If ever I made you, if I must do myself  
The wrong of confessing that you come from my race,

...  
If ever in posterity I have some share,  
I want you both to suffer disinherittance.  
If in the vengeful fire I do not throw you now,  
It’s so I might defame you: live, stunted ones, live;  
Live in the sight of all, of all honor deprived;  
It’s for your punishment that I pardon you now.] (sonnet 20: lines 1–4, 9–14)

The fate reserved both for the monsters of Montaigne’s mind and the two shameful sonnets is punishment by publication. In addition to that similarity, the two sonnets in the middle resemble the sequence itself in that both are an extended quotation in the center of the book, presented to the public (“*aux yeux de tous*”) but eventually disinherited (“*Je veux que l’un & l’autre en soit desherité*”), when Montaigne marked them out.
But the whole sonnet sequence is not so easily isolated from the rest of the *Essays*. We have seen how its influence extends to “De l’amitié.” In the same way that each chapter finds another, always symmetrically connected to it, with which it shares a common language and some situational parallels, the center of Book One finds its partner in the most structurally appropriate place, the other center that the 1580 edition—divided as it was into two volumes—provided, the middle chapter of Book Two, II: 19. And then when Book Three joins the other two books in 1588, its center, III: 7, joins the conversation, repeating the others’ words and recycling some of their situations.

The sonnet sequence is about recanting (the poet recanting the terrible things he said about his beloved in sonnets 14 and 15), while “De la liberté de conscience” [Of freedom of conscience] (II: 19) is about one of the most notorious recanters in history, Julian the Apostate. The Emperor Constantine had made Christianity the official religion of the state. When Julian came to power, he reintroduced the worship of the gods, and fostered freedom of religion (the better to divide his enemies, Montaigne asserts). That he returned to the pagan religion gave him, in Montaigne’s view, the unmerited name of “apostat, pour avoir abandonné la nostre. Toutesfois ceste opinion me semble plus vray semblable qu’il ne l’avoit jamais eue à coeur, mais que pour l’obeissance des loix il s’estoit feint jusques à ce qu’il tint l’empire en sa main” [Apostate for having abandoned ours; however, this theory seems to me more likely, that he had never had it at heart, but that, out of obedience to the laws he had dissembled until he held the Empire in his hand] (II: 19, 670a, DM 486–87; 508).

Montaigne, as so often elsewhere, creates a singular verbal echo as a tangible sign that the parallel is really there. Read again, in the very center of the sonnets, what the poet says he must later unsay:

*Ce n’est pas moy que l’on abuze ainsi:*

*Qu’à quelque enfant ses ruzes on emploie,*

15. Lawrence D. Kritzman points out an interesting textual influence of at least the title of the “Discours de la servitude volontaire” on “De l’amitié.” In friendships that law and family obligation impose “il y a d’autant moins de nostre choix & liberté volontaire. Et nostre liberté volontaire n’a point de production qui soit plus proprement sienne que celle de l’affectation et amitié” [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] (I: 28, 185a, DM 258–137). Kritzman sees Montaigne as “shifting the focus from ‘servitude volontaire’ to the ‘liberté volontaire’ of friendship” ([The Fabulous Imagination: On Montaigne’s Essais](New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 86). Yet Montaigne by this point in the chapter had already cited this title (“C’est un discours auquel il donna nom De la servitude volontaire” [I: 28, 183a, DM 253]), so one could just as easily speak of the influence of this passage on the one a few pages later in the same chapter.
Qui n’a nul goust, qui n’entend rien qu’il oye:
Je sçay aymer, je sçay hayr aussi.

Contente toi de m’avoir jusqu’ici
Fermé les yeux, il est temps que j’y voie.

[I’m not a man to suffer such abuse—
Try out those ruses on some ignorant child,
Who, artless, takes in nothing that he hears.
I know how to love, I know how to hate.

Content yourself with having until now
Kept shut my eyes, for now it’s time I saw.] (sonnet 15: lines 1–6)

And now read what Montaigne says Julian did not say:

Aussi ce que plusieurs disent de luy, qu’estant blessé à mort d’un coup de traict, il s’escria, Tu as vaincu, ou comme disent les autres, Contente toy Nazarien, n’est non plus vraisemblable. Car ceux qui estoient presens à sa mort, & qui nous en recitent toutes les particulieres circonstances, les contenances mesmes & les parolles n’en disent rien.

[Thus what several say of him, that being mortally wounded by an arrow he cried out, “You have conquered,” or as others say, “Contente yourself, Nazarene,” is not plausible, either. For those who were present at his death, and who recount to us all the particular circumstances, even the countenances and the words, say nothing about it.] (II: 19, DM 484)

The words “Contente toi” make their only appearance in the two central chapters of the original edition. But in the 1582 edition they disappeared from the second of these centers, when Montaigne removed this anecdote from the chapter on Julian. In a post-1588 revision of that chapter they returned, but on the same Bordeaux Copy Montaigne removed the sonnets, so when one “Contente toi” reappeared the other one disappeared. In other words, from 1582 on they start behaving like Castor and Pollux.

Between the 1580 and 1582 editions, Montaigne traveled to Italy, and in Rome was told by the papal censor along with some other objections that he had been too favorable to Julian. But would he have satisfied the Vatican by deleting only this passage, in which he denies that the emperor had made something approaching a death bed conversion, but let all the rest of his praise of Julian stand? He did not delete such praise as this, for instance: “C’estoit, à la vérité, un tres-grand homme et rare . . . et, de vray, il n’est
aucune sorte de vertu dequoy il n’ait laissé de tres-notables exemples” [He was, in truth, a very great and rare man . . . and indeed there is no sort of virtue of which he did not leave very notable examples] (II: 19, 669a; 507). Nor did he take away the good things he had to say about him in I: 42 or II: 21. André Tournon writes that Montaigne suppressed the anecdote and his criticism of it “by deference, it seems [semble-t-il], to the censors” (my italics)—which suggests that Tournon is not entirely convinced of it being more than a seeming. He comments further, “The suppression of this passage in 1582 attests to the boldness the essayist detected within it; its reinsertion after 1588, by a sort of recidivism, marks its importance” (Tournon, Route par ailleurs, 308). But from Montaigne seeing how bold it was it does not necessarily follow that he knew that the papal censor could detect it.

When Montaigne put the story, and his refutation of it, back into the chapter after 1588, he put it in a different place, just after his account of Julian’s death:

[A] Il dit entre autres choses, en mourant, qu’il sçavoit bon gré aux dieux et les remercioit dequoy ils ne l’avoyent pas voulu tuer par surprise . . . et qu’ils l’avoient trouvé digne de mourir de cette noble façon, sur le cours de ses victoires et en la fleur de sa gloire. Il avoit eu une pareille vision à celle de Marcus Brutus, qui premierement le menassa en Gaule et depuis se reprenta à lui en Perse sur le poinct de sa mort. [C] Ce langage qu’on lui faict tenir, quand il se sentit frappé: Tu as vaincu, Nazareen; ou, comme d’autres: Contente toi, Nazareen, n’eust esté oublié, s’il eust esté creu par mes temoings, qui, estans presens en l’armée, ont remerqué jusques aux moindres mouvements et paroles de sa fin. . . .

[(A) He said among other things, as he was dying, that he was grateful to the gods and thanked them because they had not willed to kill him by surprise . . . and that they had found him worthy to die in this noble fashion, in the course of his victories and in the flower of his glory. He had had a vision like that of Marcus Brutus, which first threatened him in Gaul and later reappeared to him in Persia just before his death. (C) These words that they have him say when he felt himself struck, “Thou hast conquered, Nazarene,” or, as others have it, “Be content, Nazarene,” would not have been forgotten if they had been believed by my witnesses, who, being present in the army, noted even the slightest movements and words at his end. . . .] (II: 19, 671ac; 509)

16. Donald Frame, though erroneously dating the deletion to 1588, says it “may have been in response to the observations of the papal censor” (508n—my italics).
Ammianus Marcellinus, one of Montaigne’s acknowledged sources, recounts the vision the essayist alludes to here:

Once when in the darkness of night he was intent upon the lofty thought of some philosopher, he saw somewhat dimly, as he admitted to his intimates, that form of the protecting deity of the state which he had seen in Gaul when he was rising to Augustan dignity, but now with veil over both head and horn of plenty, sorrowfully passing out through the curtains of his tent. And although for a moment he remained sunk in stupefaction, yet rising above all fear, he commended his future fate to the decrees of heaven, and now fully awake, the night being now far advanced, he left his bed, which was spread on the ground, and prayed to the gods with rites designed to avert their displeasure.  

It was perfectly appropriate for Montaigne to place his “Contente toi” anecdote just after mentioning this vision Ammianus recounts, as well as in the context of Julian’s death. That is where he put it in the post-1588 alteration. The question arises, why did he not also put it there in 1580? The account of Julian’s death and the allusion to the vision he did have (as opposed to the vision of Christ which Montaigne argues he did not have) were there as well in the 1580 edition. So he could have logically placed it there, but instead he put it here:

Il nous estoit apre à la verité, mais non pourtant cruel ennemy: car nos gens mesmes recitent de luy céte histoire, que se promenant un jour autour de la ville de Calcedoine, Maris l’Evesque du lieu osa bien l’appeller meschant traistre à Christ, & qu’il n’en fit autre chose sauf luy respondre, Va miserable, pleure la perte de tes yeus. À quoy l’Evesque encore repliqua, Je rens graces à Jesus Christ de m’avoir osté la veue pour ne voir ton visage impudent. Affectant, disent ils, en cela une patience philosophique. Tant y a que ce fait là ne se peut pas bien rapporter aux cruautés qu’on le dicte avoir exercées contre nous. Il estoit (dit Eutropius mon autre tesmoin) ennemi de la Chrestienté: mais sans toucher au sang. Aussi ce que plusieurs disent de luy, qu’estant blessé à mort d’un coup de trait, il s’escria, Tu as vaincu, ou comme disent les autres, Contente toy nazarien, n’est non plus vraissemblable.

[He was a harsh enemy to us, in truth, but not a cruel one. For even our own people tell of him this story, that as he was walking about the city of

Chalcedon one day, Maris, the bishop of the place, actually dared to call
him a wicked traitor to Christ, and that he did nothing about it except to
answer: “Go, wretched man, and weep for the loss of your eyes.” To which
the bishop further replied: “I give thanks to Jesus Christ for having taken
away my sight, so that I may not see your impudent face.” In this, they say,
Julian was affecting a philosophic patience. At all events, that action can-
not be reconciled with the cruelties that they say he exercised against us.
He was (says Eutropius, my other witness) an enemy of Christianity, but
without touching blood. And what several say of him, that being mortally
wounded by an arrow he cried out, “You have conquered,” or as others say,
“Content yourself, Nazarene,” is not plausible, either. (II: 19, 669–70a, DM
483–84; 507–8*)

One reason he may have initially put the anecdote here in 1580 is that this
is also the place where he makes another allusion through a unique verbal
echo to the same lines in sonnet 15 where “Contente toi” appears. When
the bishop says that he thanks Jesus Christ “de m’avoir osté la veue” [for hav-
ing taken away my sight] he is repeating almost verbatim, minus the thanks,
what the speaker in the poem said as the completion of the verbal construc-
tion that “Contente toi” began: “Contente toi de m’avoir jusqu’ici / Fermé les
yeux, il est temps que j’y voie” [Contente toi, Fermé les yeux, for it is time I saw] (sonnet 15, lines 5–6). The expression “de m’avoir” with blinding as its completion appears in no other passage. The
coincidence between that singular echo and the structural connection linking
the two places where they appear—the center of one book and the center of
the other—make it hard to imagine that Montaigne was unaware of what he
was doing. When he deleted the sonnets on the Bordeaux Copy and restored
the “Contente toi” anecdote to II: 19 he separated it from the bishop’s echo
of the speaker in the sonnets, and put it where more logically it should have
gone in the first place, in an account of Julian’s death and of another vision
he had had. The sonnets gone, there was no longer any reason to put the
anecdote where it did not belong.

These singular echoes (“Contente toi” and “de m’avoir” + “osté la veue” /
“Fermé les yeux”) are matched by another that brings the remaining central
chapter, III: 7, into the conversation. “De l’incommodité de la grandeur” (III:
7) is about the difficulty of being king when no one will play against you in
earnest. A king is surrounded by such a strong radiance that his subjects are
blinded: “Cette lueur estrangere qui l’environne, le cache, & nous le desrobe,
nostre veüe s’y rompt & s’y dissipe, estant remplie & arrestée par cette forte
“forte lumiere” [That extraneous glare that surrounds him hides him and conceals him from us; our sight breaks and is dissipated by it, being filled and arrested by this strong light] (III: 7, 919a, DM 404v; 702). Where else do we find a “forte lumiere” in the Essays? Only in the 29 sonnets:

J’ay veu ses yeux perçans, j’ay veu sa face claire:
(Nul jamais sans son dam ne regarde les dieux)
Froit, sans coeur me laissa son oeil victorieux,
Tout estourdy du coup de sa forte lumiere.
Comme un surpris de nuit aux champs quand il esclaire,
Estonné, se pallist si la fleche des cieux
Sifflant, luy passe contre, & luy serre les yeux,
Il tremble, & veoit, transi, Jupiter en colere.

[I have seen her piercing eyes, have seen her bright face
(Never does any man unharmed gaze on the gods);
Bereft of heart, and chilled, by her victorious eye,
All dazzled and awed by the force of its strong light.
Like one surprised at night by lightning’s sudden flash,
Who, astonished, turns pale—the arrow from the skies
Hissing, passes by, making him shut tight his eyes.
He trembles and, transfixed, sees Jupiter in rage.] (sonnet 5, lines 1–8)

The beloved of the sonnets, who prefigures Christ in II: 19 as the one to whom one says “Contente toi,” prefigures the king in III: 7 as the one whose “forte lumiere” bedazzles and blinds. The puzzle pieces fall into place when we recollect that Christ in II: 19 is also the one who blinds: “Je rens graces à Jesus Christ de m’avoir osté la veue” [I give thanks to Jesus Christ for having taken away my sight]. That makes the parallel between the beloved of the sonnets and the Christ of II: 19 all the stronger.

III: 7 is further connected to II: 19 by the fact that when the bishop is addressing Julian he talking to a sovereign whom he cannot see. Montaigne’s point in III: 7 is that we can never see a king, that we are always blinded when we get near one. Chapters I: 29, II: 19 and III: 7, in other words, just like the other chapters in their symmetrical pairings, recycle the same elements in beautiful and playful ways.

Montaigne gives royally induced sight impairment a fresh spin just a few lines after talking about the “forte lumiere” that blinds a king’s subjects. As we cede all advantages of honor to kings,
aussi conforte l’on & auctorise les deffauts & vices qu’ils ont: non seulement par approbation, mais aussi par imitation. Chacun des suyvans d’Alexandre portoit comme luy la teste à costé. Et les flateurs de Dionysius s’entreheurtoyent en sa presence, pousoyent & versoyent ce qui se rencontroit à leurs pieds, pour dire qu’ils avoyent la veuë aussi courte que luy.

[so we confirm and authorize the defects they have, not only by approbation but also by imitation. Every one of the followers of Alexander carried his head on one side, as he did; and the flatterers of Dionysius bumped into one another in his presence, stumbled upon and knocked over what was at their feet, to signify that they were as shortsighted as he.] (III: 7, 919a, DM 404v; 702)

In a reversal reminiscent of the way a situation is recycled from one symmetrically related chapter to another, these subjects employ a feigned partial blindness in order to flatter their sovereign, while the bishop in II: 19 made use of his genuine blindness to insult his.

Before talking about Julian, Montaigne complains about the disappearance of texts due to religious zeal:

Il est certain qu’en ces premiers temps que nostre religion commença à fleurir & à gaigner authorité & puissance avec les loix, le zele en arma plusieurs contre toute sorte de livres payens, de quoy les gens de lettre souffrent une merveilleuse perte. J’estime que ce desordre ait plus porté de nuysance aux lettres, que tous les feux des barbares.

[It is certain that in those early times when our religion began to flower and to gain authority and power with the laws, zeal armed many believers against every sort of pagan books, thus causing men of letters to suffer an extraordinary loss. I consider that this excess did more harm to letters than all the bonfires of the barbarians.] (II: 19, 668a, DM 481; 506)

La Boétie’s Discours de la servitude volontaire comes close to being just such a missing text, not totally lost to posterity as were the pagan ones alluded to here, but missing all the same from the place where Montaigne says he wanted it to appear, thanks to a certain religious zeal. The pagan texts went missing because such zeal took them out of circulation, while the Discours is missing from the Essays because it was circulated. Emmanuel Naya suggests that Montaigne in II: 19 may be alluding to another missing text of La Boétie’s:
One could point to the parallel, this time in the center of Book Two, between these pages and another text of La Boétie’s that Montaigne had not published either when he edited his posthumous works in 1571: the Mémoire touchant l’Édit de janvier, in which he envisaged the positive effects of a temporary solution based on establishing freedom of conscience. Might this be homage by substituted praise, paralleling the substitution of the sonnets for the Discours de la servitude volontaire in Book One, before the ultimate removal of all foreign texts?  

In Essais sur les Essais, Michel Butor notes that the first words of “De l’incommodité de la grandeur”—“Puisque nous ne la pouvons aveindre, vengeons nous à en mesdire” [Since we cannot attain it, let us take our revenge by speaking ill of it] (III: 7, 916b, DM 402v; 509)—“are almost an echo” (173) of the last words of “De la liberté de conscience”: “n’ayants peu ce qu’ils vouloient, ils ont faict semblant de vouloir ce qu’ils pouvoient” [having been unable to do what they would, they have pretended to will what they could] (II: 19, 672a, DM 489; 509). It is in fact both a sameness and a twist of the sort we have seen in symmetrically paired chapters. The sameness is that in both passages one wants what one cannot have. The twist is that in III: 7 one pretends not to want the thing one wants but cannot have (“Puisque nous ne la pouvons aveindre, vengeons nous à en mesdire” [Since we cannot attain it, let us take our revenge by speaking ill of it] while in II: 19 one settles for what one can get and pretends to want that. In III: 7, we would like to possess the “grandeur” to which the chapter’s title alludes. In II: 19, kings of Montaigne’s time would like a unified kingdom with no division between Protestants and Catholics, and the king of France in particular would like a unified Catholic nation. But the Protestants are too strong to extinguish, and civil war rages. So a truce is called and the Protestants are for a while no longer attacked by the state. The hope is that

de lâcher la bride aus pars, d’entretenir leur opinion c’est les amolir & relascher par la facilité & par l’aysance, & que c’est emousser l’eguillon qui s’affine par la rarité, la nouvelleté & la difficulté. Et si croy mieux pour l’honneur de la devotion de noz rois, c’est que n’ayants peu ce qu’ils vouloient, ils ont faict semblant de vouloir ce qu’ils pouvoient.
[to loosen the rein for factions, allowing them to entertain their own opinions, is to soften and relax them through facility and ease, and to dull the point, which is sharpened by rarity, novelty, and difficulty. And I prefer to think, for the reputation of our kings’ piety, that having been unable to do what they would, they have pretended to will what they could.] (II: 19, 672a, DM 489; 509*)

The words I have italicized return in what Montaigne has to say in III: 7 about the disadvantage of royal greatness, which is that a monarch cannot participate in “les essays que nous faisons les uns contre les autres, par jalou-sie d’honneur & de valeur, soit aux exercices du corps ou de l’esprit” [the trials of strength we have with one another, in rivalry of honor and worth, whether in exercises of the body or of the mind] (III: 7, 918b, DM 403v; 701) because his subjects offer no genuine resistance and always let him win.

Qui ne participe au hazard & difficulté, ne peut pretendre interest à l’honneur & plaisir qui suit les actions hazardeuses. C’est pitié de pouvoir tant, qu’il advienne que toutes choses vous cedent. . . . Cette aysance & lâche facil-ité, de faire tout baisser soubs soy, est ennemye de toute sorte de plaisir. . . . Concevez l’homme accompagné de l’omnipotence, vous l’abisme: il faut qu’il vous demande par aumosne, de l’empeschement & de la resistance.

[He who does not share the risk and difficulty can claim no involvement in the honor and pleasure that follow hazardous actions. It is a pity to have so much power that everything gives way to you. . . . That ease and slack facility of making everything bow beneath you is the enemy of every kind of pleasure. . . . Imagine man accompanied by omnipotence: he is sunk; he must ask you for hindrance and resistance, as an alms.] (III: 7, 919b, DM 404v; 701–2)

These words make their only joint appearances in these two chapters.

When Julian came to power he wanted to re-establish the worship of the gods and to accomplish this he reopened the temples and decreed that his subjects, whether Christian or pagan, should follow “sans empeschement & sans crainte” [without hindrance and without fear] (II: 19, 671a, DM 488; 509) the tenets of their own religion. In doing so, he employed “pour attiser le trouble de la dissention civile de cette mesme recepte de liberté de conscience, que noz Roys viennent d’employer pour l’étaindre” [to kindle the trouble of civil dissension, that same recipe of freedom of conscience that
our kings have just been employing to extinguish it] (II: 19, 671a, DM 489; 509). For our kings that would supposedly result in weakening the Protestants by giving them “facilité” and “aysance” and taking away all “difficulté.”

In other words, Montaigne is saying the same thing about the disadvantage of royal grandeur that he says about Julian’s and the modern-day kings’ political strategies. In both chapters, one suffers from having difficulties smoothed away. But in a characteristic opposition, in II: 19 it is kings who hinder their opposing subjects by making things too easy for them, while in III: 7 it is subjects who do that to kings.

In a metafictional way, another remark he makes at this point about the disadvantage of greatness is applicable to what he is at this moment doing (as well as continually doing) in the Essays: “Leurs bonnes qualitez sont mortes & perdues, car elles ne se sentent que par comparaison, & on les met hors” [Their good qualities are dead and wasted, for these are felt only by comparison, and they are out of comparison] (III: 7, 919b, DM 404v; 702). It is only by comparing one chapter with its structurally related other (through their symmetry or, in this case, their being in the middle) that we can see their true excellence. Is it by chance that Montaigne calls these comparisons “essays” made “les uns contre les autres” [each against the other]?

Let us return one last time to the sonnets. Given that they occupy the center of Book One, what might be the center of this center? Since French prosody is based on syllable count, it ought to be possible to find the central syllable or syllables of a collection of poems by simple arithmetic. It is a little more complicated in this case, since not only do fifteen of the sonnets have twelve-syllable lines and fourteen have ten-syllable lines, but in addition their arrangement with regard to syllable count is not entirely regular. They fall into six groups, composed respectively of 2, 2, 7, 6, 6, and 6 sonnets. Sonnets 1–2 are composed of 12-syllable lines, Sonnets 3–4 of 10, Sonnets 5–11 of 12, Sonnets 12–17 of 10, Sonnets 18–23 of 12, and Sonnets 24–29 of 10. But the math is still simple: the total number of syllables can be determined by adding the sum of decasyllables—14 sonnets x 14 lines x 10 syllables = 1960 syllables—to the number of alexandrine syllables: 15 sonnets x 14 lines x 12 syllables = 2520 syllables. This gives us 4480 syllables. The two central syllables will therefore be the 2240th and the 2241st. Where they fall in the sequence can be determined if we add the total number of syllables in each metric group and keep a running tally until syllables 2240 and 2241 are reached:
IV. Journey to the Center of the Book

Sonnets 1 through 2: 2 sonnets x 14 lines x 12 syllables: 336 syllables.
Total so far: 336.
Sonnets 3 through 4: 2 sonnets x 14 lines x 10 syllables: 280 syllables. Total so far: 616.
Sonnets 5 through 11: 7 sonnets x 14 lines x 12 syllables: 1176 syllables.
Total so far: 1792.
Sonnets 12 through 17: 6 sonnets x 14 lines x 10 syllables: 840 syllables.
Total so far: 2632.

The two central syllables are therefore somewhere in the group of decasyllabic sonnets between 12 and 17. To find precisely where, we bear in mind that each sonnet in this decasyllabic group has 140 syllables (14 lines x 10 syllables per line). Because 2240–1792 = 448, it will be the 448th in this metric group. Sonnets 12 through 14 = 3 sonnets x 140 syllables per sonnet = 420 syllables. This means that the 448th syllable in this group—syllable 2240 of the 29 sonnets’ total—will be the 28th syllable in sonnet 15. The other central syllable (the 2241st) will the 29th syllable in sonnet 15.

But this is a strange coincidence, for the number (448) that the first of these two syllables bears within its metric group (sonnets 12 through 17) is strangely similar to the total number of sonnets in the whole sequence, 4480; and the second of these two central syllables, as the 29th in its sonnet, bears the same number as the total number of sonnets: 29. So in this sequence of 29 sonnets comprising 4480 syllables each of the two central syllables seems to refer to one of two available numbers signifying the whole sequence: one to the total number of syllables and the other to the total number of sonnets. What would be the odds of this happening by chance? Astronomical, really.

If La Boétie did it on purpose, it does not follow that Montaigne was aware of it. But then Montaigne would have been blissfully ignorant of a particularly striking “vaine subtilité” at the heart of his first book, as Bellerophon (or Uriah the Hittite) was unaware of the content of the message he was carrying. Indeed, there is something like a message in this center. Here are the two central syllables, in context:

Ce n’est pas moy que l’on abuze ainsi:
   Qu’à quelque enfant ces nineteen ruizes on emploie,
   Qui n’a nul goust, qui n’entend rien qu’il oyt.

[I’m not a man to suffer such abuse—

19. I have corrected the “ses” [her, his] that appears in 1580, 1582, and 1588 to “ces” because “ses” makes no sense, since he is addressing the beloved when he says “Contente toy.” Albert-Marie Schmidt makes the same correction in his Poètes du XVIe siècle (Paris: Gallimard / Pléiade: 1953), 698.
Try out those ruses on some ignorant child,
Who, artless, takes in nothing that he hears.] (Sonnet 15, lines 1–3)

The message, if there is one, is about nothing—that is, about nothingness. The speaker asserts that he is not naive, not a childlike being who understands nothing that he hears. Metafictionally, we may have permission to read this line a little differently: that it is a question of understanding or not understanding the rien that one hears. How then might we readers understand this rien that we read? At roughly the same time Montaigne was deleting this rien and the sonnets surrounding it, he added the following description of his book to “De la phisionomie”: “[Je] ne traite à point nommé de rien que du rien, ny d’aucune science que de celle de l’inscience” [there is nothing I treat of specifically except of nothing, nor of any knowledge except that of the lack of knowledge] (III: 12, 1057c; 809*). Long before Flaubert, Montaigne, it seems, wrote a book about nothing.20 So it is weirdly appropriate that there should be a rien in the middle of the middle of Book One.

Montaigne quotes La Boétie’s poetry twice more in Book One, and on both occasions the middle of the line that is quoted seems to refer to the middle of the sonnets. The first quotation is placed at the beginning of “Du parler prompt ou tardif” [Of prompt or slow speech]: “Onc ne furent à tous, toutes graces données” [Never to all were all graces given] (I: 10, 39a, DM 39; 25*). Totality is twice expressed in the central syllables of this alexandrine line, as totality is twice expressed in the central syllables of the sonnets: the total number of syllables, as the first syllable being exactly one-tenth of the total number of syllables, and the total number of sonnets, as the second syllable being the 29th in the sonnet in which the center appears. Not only that, but the sonnet from which Montaigne took this line (the fourteenth of the 25 sonnets Montaigne published in 1571) refers, just two lines before this one, to a hidden tenth:

. . . du peuple ay pitié:
De mil vertus qu’il voit en un corps ordonnees,
La dixme il n’en voit pas, & les laisse pour moy:
Certes j’en ay pitié; mais puis apres je voy
Qu’ounc ne furent à tous toutes graces données.

[ . . . I pity the common herd:
Of a thousand virtues in one body arranged,
They don’t even see the tenth, and leave them for me.

Certainly I pity then, but afterwards I see
That never to all were all graces given.] (lines 11–14; Desgraves, vol. 2, 123)

The speaker of the poem is referring to the thousand virtues arranged in the body of his beloved, but in the new context Montaigne gives this passage by quoting it in Book One, where the 29 sonnets occupy center stage, they could be taken to refer to the hidden tenth that no one sees but himself (the common herd do not see the other nine tenths either). It might not be by chance that this quotation begins a tenth chapter.

The other line from La Boétie that Montaigne quotes in the First Book appears in “Que le goust des biens et des maux depend en bonne partie de l’opinion que nous en avons” [That the taste of good and evil things depends in large measure on the opinion we have of them]: “Aut fuit, aut veniet, nihil est praesentis in illa” [Either it (i.e., death) has been or is to come; nothing of the present is in it] (I: 14, 56a, DM 64; 37*). The nothingness that is at the center of the 29 sonnets is at the center again here, thanks to the fact that Montaigne quoted only this one line from his friend’s Latin poem and none of the more than three hundred others. In quoting this line, as he did the other one, Montaigne made it stand alone, with a nihil in the middle.21

21. Charles S. Singleton discovered in Dante something analogous to La Boétie’s having placed significant numbers at the numerical center of his sonnet sequence as well as to the variable in the poetic structure of the sequence that made such placement possible (Charles S. Singleton, “The Poet’s Number at the Center,” MLN 80 [1965]: 1–10). The variable in La Boétie’s case is the meter; specifically, his decision to make some sonnets decasyllabic and some alexandrine, and to distribute these different metrical groups in the precise way he did. For Dante, writes Singleton, “the one variable in the component parts of this poem, as the poet has conceived it, is the length of the cantos,” which vary from 115 to 160 verses. What he found was that the seven central cantos of Purgatory (in the center of the Divine Comedy) display an absolute symmetry in their respective length: 151 + 145 + 139 + 145 + 145 + 151 lines. What is equally remarkable is that this seven (the number of symmetrical cantos at the center) should repeat itself in the seventieth line of this central canto, the exact center of the entire Divine Comedy. (Similarly, the 448th syllable at the center of the twenty-nine sonnets is one-tenth of his total number of 4480 syllables.) All this was possible only because of the variable Dante had to play with, just as all that happens in the center of the sonnets is possible only because of the variable the poet had up his sleeve. “Only such a canto length,” Singleton writes, “could give us a verse numbered 70 at the precise midpoint of the whole poem.” In responding to an attack on Singleton’s argument by Richard J. Pegis, who held that such a construction was more likely to have been the product of chance, J. L. Logan invoked Occam’s razor: “For it is surely questionable to assume that an organized poetic unit can be treated as if it were merely a random arrangement of unrelated elements” (J. L. Logan, “The Poet’s Central Numbers,” MLN 86 [1971]: 95–98). It is “questionable” because inconsistent with Occam’s principle, which orders us to accept the theory which saves the phenomena “with the fewest possible assumptions.” That such a phenomenon could have been intended in the Divine Comedy, “a special poem in connection with which the word ‘random’ does not come quickly to mind,” seems more likely than not. Neither, in light of what secrets the sonnets reveal, may ‘random’ be the best word to describe the Essays, nor the twenty-nine sonnets—nor the interplay between the two.