

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Boutcher, Warren. The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe. Vol. 1, The Patron-Author. Vol. 2, The Reader-Writer

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Volume 41, numéro 2, printemps 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085972ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29849>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Hoffmann, G. (2018). Compte rendu de [Boutcher, Warren. The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe. Vol. 1, The Patron-Author. Vol. 2, The Reader-Writer]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(2), 154–156. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29849>

Even if critics may ultimately be skeptical of Borris's claim that Spenser is a "philosopher-poet," the richness and depth of Borris's achievement in *Visionary Spenser* belies any whisperings among English literary scholars that studies of classical influences on canonical authors is passé. On the contrary, Borris's work demonstrates that such studies remain fruitful, literary fields of inquiry we ought to cultivate.

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**Boutcher, Warren.**

*The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe. Vol. 1, The Patron-Author. Vol. 2, The Reader-Writer.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. lxxviii + 356 / xxxiv + 506. 64 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-1987-3967-8 (hardcover) US\$210.

Warren Boutcher's nearly one-thousand-page *School of Montaigne* fields a critical history of Montaigne's unique role in promoting the ideal of "autonomous selfhood" (lxiv) in European and American culture. His book at first appears to challenge such autonomy by resituating Montaigne within the crowded cultural networks of early modern reader-writers who bore multiple financial and legal dependencies and various social and moral obligations. In early modern clientage networks and the constant, tense jockeying to win favour that they fostered, little would seem "autonomous."

But here is where Boutcher parts ways with other scholars who have contextualized the *Essays* in an attempt to defuse the idealism that has surrounded the work's reception for centuries. He insists that Montaigne's book nevertheless *did* liberate readers and that this enfranchisement proves one of the signal achievements of European literary culture. These two volumes thus confront one with a question: are readers autonomous from the institutions and values that inform their reading, or are they obligated to them? Is Montaigne's book a product of its time or a transhistorical model for thinking independently that anticipates, whiggishly or not, a future it helped create?

One thinker in particular underpins Boutcher's novel procedure in *The School of Montaigne*. Alfred Gell's 1998 *Art and Agency*, it is safe to say, constitutes

the book without which *The School of Montaigne* could not have handled freedom and contextualization in the unique way that it does. In the eight months before his untimely demise, the anthropologist Gell worked furiously to construct a theory of art that could read across the Western “high” art masterpieces and non-Western ethnographic “artifacts.” Gell’s mischievous argument implied that a deep-seated apotropaic impulse underlies art around the world—even modern art, and even in the West. One of the most surprising upshots of his work, then, is his contention that a charm-like protective impulse lies at the heart of our investment in culture, silently shaping the reasons we produce art.

Boutcher engages with Gell’s unexpected provocation when he begins his book with the charms and talismans that feature in Montaigne’s “Of the Force of the Imagination”: in particular, in the well-known story of a young nobleman on his wedding night afraid that a spell of impotency has been cast on him. Montaigne provides the anxious groom with a false amulet, and Boutcher cites this trinket’s repurposing as a “prophylactic against apprehension” (1:10). Boutcher immediately transfers these apotropaic properties to texts, asking if the *Essays* do not “divert” and “entrap” with an aim to Montaigne’s own “self-preservation” in highly contentious times that made expressing opinions on political and religious topics extremely risky (1:12), resembling the way in which Gell’s maze-like decorative surfaces distract and trap evil spirits. Boutcher reminds us how widespread early modern belief was in the magical properties of writing, concluding that “the two artefacts—medallion and book—carry agency and agency relations in analogous ways within the early modern humanistic culture” (1:62). The *Essays* thus act apotropaically in how they provide “a template for the adoption of a stable *persona*” (2:408) applied to “the experience of private reader-writers across a Europe ravaged with religious troubles” (2:322). This should make sufficiently clear how little Boutcher’s project counts as a re-working of Alan Boase’s 1935 *Fortunes of Montaigne*.

Books index human agency in the ways they invite readers to infer dispositions and intentions on the part of an author, something Montaigne himself models through how he interprets the classical writers he regularly quotes. This attribution and redeployment of agency participates in the interrogation of causality that takes place more generally throughout the *Essays* but exerts itself pointedly against instrumental uses of reading. The literary field thus offers an arena in which reader-writers exercise their independence in a series of transitive exchanges whereby they enfranchise themselves through

publicly assessing, defending, and adapting a preceding author: Plutarch thus licenses Amyot, who licenses Montaigne, who licenses Gournay; similarly, Sebond licenses Bunel, who licenses Pierre Eyquem, who licenses Montaigne, who licenses further apologists who borrow from his apology of Sebond.

The enfranchisement Boutcher tracks across the centuries does not limit itself to a freedom “from,” illustrated in how Montaigne disregards received wisdom, disdains authority, or circumvents convention—although the liberal tradition of reading Montaigne has largely confined itself to such an understanding of the *Essays* (2:461–62). Instead, Boutcher focuses on a freedom “to,” on how the book enables social inferences about the origins and intentions of ideas and personal judgments regarding their use and application. In short, the kind of freedom exemplified in the *Essays* lies in how the book encourages readers to formulate their own literary, philosophical, and ethical judgments. This is a freedom exercised largely on learned literature and in aesthetic and philosophical terms, and if such holds political implications, their consequences lie at some distance from Montaigne and his time. *The School of Montaigne* places Montaigne at the inception point of the modern literary sphere, a preliminary phase for Habermas’s public sphere, similar to its emphasis on interpersonal ratiocination, but falling shy of the public sphere’s overt engagement with politics.

Resembling nothing so much as an Anthony Grafton of vernacular scholarship, Boutcher leaps from France to the Netherlands, from England to Italy, and from Spain to Germany in order to track thousands of interlinked references to the *Essays*. Early readers such as Pierre de L’Estoile, Marie de Gournay, and Pieter Van Veen figure prominently, naturally, but so do modern critics who have shaped our contemporary reception of Montaigne, such as Pierre Villey, Erich Auerbach, and Donald Frame. The book’s impressive span aims at two distinct ends: as a summation of Montaigne’s reception and influence, Boutcher’s *School of Montaigne* stands as a reference work for all scholars and the starting point for those likely to want to explore these questions further; at the same time, it mounts a novel and provocative challenge to current literary studies in how it shows that contextualization can not only determine historical actors, it can liberate them.

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