Montaigne's Tasso: Madness, melancholy and the enigma of Italy

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Abstract
This essay re-examines the question of Montaigne's view of contemporary Italy and Italians by focusing on his allusions to Tasso in the Essays. It places Montaigne's Italianism in the context of the virulent anti-Italian polemics in France in the 1570s and 1580s, and argues that his strategic choice of Tasso as an emblem for Italy, following his tour of the peninsula in 1580 to 1581, points to a conflicted, deeply ambivalent perspective on Franco-Italian relations in the late 16th century. In the Essays, Tasso and Italy become associated with brilliance and decay, madness and tragic decline.

Keywords
Essais, Franco-Italian relations, Gerusalemme liberata, madness, Montaigne, Tasso

Michel de Montaigne's first allusion to Italy and Italians in the Essays is a surprising one. It seems to come early on, at the opening of the second essay, 'De la tristesse,' but is in fact a late addition to the book (a C-text or Bordeaux manuscript emendation), thus suggesting a careful revision to the texture of Italian reference in the work:

Je suis des plus exempts de cette passion, et ne l'aime ny l'estime, quoy que le monde ayt prins, comme à prix faict, de l'honorer de faveur particuliere. Ils en habilent la sagesse, la vertu, la conscience: sot et monstrueux ornement. Les Italiens ont plus sortablement baptisé de son nom la malignité. Car c'est une qualité toujours nuisible, toujours folle, et, comme toujours couarde et basse, les Stoïciens en défendent le sentiment à leurs sages.¹

(I am one of those freest from this passion. I neither like it nor respect it, although everyone has decided to honor it, as if at a fixed price, with particular favor. They clothe wisdom, virtue, conscience with it: a stupid and monstrous ornament! The Italians, more appropriately, have baptized malignancy with its name. For it is always a harmful

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quality, always insane; and, as being always cowardly and base, the Stoics forbid their sages to feel it.)

Before any evocation of Italian cultural bounty or artistic magnificence, before any allusion to Franco-Italian political relations, Montaigne’s Italians are distinguished by a linguistic habit, one which foreshadows a habit of mind: *tristezza* in Italian signifies sadness or melancholy, but can also be used to mean malice or ill-will. *Tristesse* emerges in the form of a ‘passion,’ a sensibility or a state of being – a double-edged melancholy associated with wisdom, virtue and conscience but also with madness, sickness, cowardice, and ‘malignité.’ It is an emotion in excess, driving the individual to extreme self-display or mute resolution, and in the course of the essay, Montaigne draws on citations by Ovid, Petrarch, Catullus and Virgil to make his point. And yet, why are the Italians singled out as being oddly qualified to name and describe this quality? Conversely, what does the peculiar linguistic doubling of an emotion (*tristesse*) and moral judgment (*malignité*) tell us about Montaigne’s vision of Italy and the Italians?

It is striking that while there is no shortage of scholarship on Montaigne’s love, debt and use of the classics, his numerous evocations of Rome, his reading of specific Italian authors and translations, there are few discussions of Montaigne’s Italians as experts on sadness or melancholia – with one crucial exception. The figure of the mad Tasso, imprisoned at the hospital of Sant’Anna in Ferrara, haunts the *Essais* as well as criticism on Montaigne’s Italy. It offers a dark counterpoint to the Italy of the ancients which looms large in the French humanist’s imagination; for, though the Eternal City leaves its mark on his text, there is surprisingly little of contemporary cinquecento Italy in the *Essais*, and of what Enzo Giudici (1982: 4) has described as ‘the role of Italian culture in the spiritual formation of Montaigne.’ Indeed, until the 18th-century discovery of the manuscript journal of Montaigne’s journey to Italy in 1581, any discussion of Montaigne’s Italy was limited to the 68 general references to Italy and Italians in the *Essais*. And these textual traces of Italy – much like Italy itself in the period – lack a cohesive unity or a sustained figurative presence. They are dispersed across the book like the veil of melancholy, which the Italians can name so clearly.

Montaigne’s citations of contemporary Italian authors are also relatively slim: Jean Balsamo (2006) counts 70 lines cited in Italian scattered unequally throughout his essays, and of these, the most-cited author is, significantly, Torquato Tasso. More tellingly, only three full-length books in the last 20 years – one of which is a collection of essays – have been devoted to the ‘présences italiennes’ in the work of Montaigne, none of which dwell on the peculiar trope of Italian *tristezza* – a surprising lacuna if one thinks, for instance, of the amount of scholarship related to Montaigne’s cannibals.

I begin with this survey to highlight a strategic absence. Despite the supposed ‘italianism’ in Montaigne’s writing, and despite the critical success of the *Essais* in the Italian literary establishment, Italy and Italians occupy an ambivalent position in his writing. In the *Essais*, we find that Italy is repeatedly subject to conquest and
domination, and while Italian literature may serve as a model for French literary endeavors, it must eventually be superseded or simply left out. In his *Journal*, Montaigne complains that Italian hostels are not as clean as French ones and not nearly as comfortable as German ones; in fact, his secretary famously remarks, on their entry into Italy that ‘Je croy à la vérité que, s’il eut été sul avec les siens, il fût allé plustot à Cracovie ou vers la Grèce par terre, que de prendre le tour vers l’Italie…’ (‘I truly believe that if Monsieur de Montaigne had been alone...he would rather have gone to Cracow or toward Greece by land than make the turn toward Italy.’) Rome itself, the pinnacle of Montaigne’s Italianate imagination, is deceptive and disappointing – it remains, paradoxically, in the essay ‘On vanity,’ the goal of his journeys but also the icon of vanity itself.

Such moments highlight a thread of Italian ambivalence and textual diffuseness in Montaigne’s *Essais* that must be considered alongside the strong current of anti-Italian sentiment in France in the 1570s and 1580s. As several scholars have noted, Montaigne’s references to Italy and Italian authors change significantly through the various editions of the *Essais*, suggesting a subtle but shifting dialogue with the imagined cultural space that is Italy in the late 16th century. These shifts register Montaigne’s own experience during his travels in the peninsula in 1581, but also a wider French engagement with Italian influence at a cultural as well as socio-political and economic plane that was as conflictual as it was admiring. An emerging Franco-Italian *paragone* can be discerned in a range of texts across the period, including some by Tasso and Montaigne himself. It is against this background of competitive ambivalence that Montaigne’s comment on the double meaning of Italian *tristesse* becomes important, revealing itself as more than just a kind of national stereotype. Instead, it points to a pervasive and polemical strand in the *Essais* of reimagining Italy and Italian culture as a tragic emblem of civilizational decline, of madness and intellectual corruption.

This vision becomes most apparent in Montaigne’s use of Torquato Tasso, which will be the focus of this essay. For, after all, one of the most resonant and best-known images of Italy in the book is that of Tasso, the mad genius, who becomes the emblem of human intellectual frailty in the ‘Apologie de Raymond Sebond.’ Significantly, it is also Tasso who overtly introduces the question of a Franco-Italian *paragone* into the texture of the book. Towards the end of ‘Des boyteux,’ Montaigne alludes to ‘the comparison he [Tasso] makes between France and Italy’ suggesting his familiarity with a letter that the Italian poet had written to Ercole de’ Contrari after his visit to France in 1570 to 1571, and later published in 1581 as ‘Lettera...nella quale paragona l’Italia alla Francia’ (Tasso, 1985). Tasso’s letter contains a scathing denunciation of France and French mores in comparison to the glories of Italy, which Montaigne himself would obliquely reproduce in his own musings on the relative merits of Paris and Milan (Cavallini, 2003). But by transforming Tasso himself into a metaphor for the state of Italy and its existential sensibility, its own *tristesse*, Montaigne powerfully absorbs and reverses the Italian poet’s critique.
Montaigne’s ‘Italianism’ versus French anti-Italianism

Let us begin, though, with the question of Montaigne’s Italianism, which seems to stand in contrast to the groundswell of anti-Italianism in France in the 1570s and 1580s. Until fairly recently, the often virulent anti-Italian polemic in France had rarely been studied, being relegated mostly to discussions of linguistic purity and borrowing. But the renewed interest in early modern European nation-building has raised the question of how nascent nationalisms defined themselves against their neighbors and there is new interest in Franco-Italian relations both cultural and political during the Wars of Religion. From a cultural perspective, there is little question about the extensive Italian borrowings in 16th century French literature and art following Francis I’s military forays into the Italian peninsula. To quote Yvonne Bellenger (1991: 317), ‘Italy was, after Antiquity, the second mother of French letters.’ Italian affectations – linguistic, sartorial, behavioral – soon became the mark of having served in the king’s wars in Italy, a badge of martial valor as well as of worldly sophistication. Montaigne’s father, Pierre, was a veteran of the Italian wars and seems to have kept a journal (now lost) of his Italian experiences.

In Montaigne’s own time, many went to Italy to study at fencing and dancing schools to acquire these marks of distinction: as late as 1581, on his arrival in Padua, he observes that ‘there were more than a hundred French gentlemen’ at such schools (Montaigne, 1955: 71). Court culture at Fontainebleau under Francis and Henry II was decidedly Italianate: the import of Italian artists such as Rosso Fiorentino and Benvenuto Cellini to enhance, one might say, a French Renaissance aesthetic provided the impetus for French artistic production, but, in its entwining of Italian style and French substance, it also fostered an anxiety about the definition of French versus Italian identity. By 1560, at the beginning of Catherine de’ Medici’s regency and on the eve of the wars of religion, Italian style in France was double-edged: on the one hand it indicated social distinction and worldly sophistication, a mastery of arms and women, on the other, it was a measure of the dilution of French purity by a foreign invader.

Indeed, the 1560s and 1570s were to be the decades of growing fervent anti-Italian sentiment, first taking form in terms of a linguistic quarrel. Barthélemy Aneau’s Quintil horatien condemned Du Bellay’s Deffense et illustration de la langue françoise for its Italianate borrowings, famously claiming that ‘qui a pays n’a que faire de patrie’ (‘whoever has a pays has no need of a patrie’). In the contrast between the Greek pays and the Italianate patrie, we see one of the reasons for the programmatic rise and preference for Hellenism in France as opposed to the Latin/Roman culture that defined Italian history – to trace French origins to a Roman or Latin past was in some way to cede primacy to the Italians; to construct a Trojan origin story for the Franks, as Ronsard would attempt in his epic Franciade, was to return directly to the source and stake a claim for equivalence (if not primacy) with regard to classical inheritance. But the language question – the matter of keeping French pure and free of ‘Italian corruptions’ (to quote Aneau) particularly given the impact of Italian
culture on the French vernacular under the influence of Catherine de’ Medici – only masked larger social and political anxieties. Catherine’s control of the state, the elevation of Italian nobles at court, the economic power of Italian banking families in a major regional center like Lyon, the complex political mapping of Catholic and Huguenot identities on to the Franco-Italian divide – all this produced a fear (and eventually violence) against what Timothy Hampton (2001: 155) describes as ‘the cultural Other who seemed to be infecting the court – the very center of France.’ Indeed, in Henri Estienne’s *Deux dialogues de nouveau langage français italianisé* of 1578 (Estienne, 1972), the Protestant printer depicts the linguistic destabilization caused by the Italian influence as a kind of plague against which only a few old French families can hold out – and the parallel here to that other infection, syphilis, also thought to be an import of the Italian wars, cannot be ignored.

It is against this context that Tasso visits the court of Charles IX in 1570 to 1571 and against which Montaigne leaves for his tour of Italy in 1580. At first glance, Montaigne’s apparent Italianism – his passion for the Latin classics, his deep mastery of Italian (a section of the *Journal* is written in Italian), his yearning for Rome, his evidently careful reading of major contemporary Italian writers, especially Ariosto who seems to have been an early favorite, seems to align him with the Italianism of the Catholic French nobility. Balsamo suggests that Italianism is also a key aspect of the social project of the *Essais* to shape and reflect French nobility by manifesting and confirming the nobility of their author. Montaigne’s avowed Italianism is thus a sign of an intellectual tradition as much as it is a conscious reminder of social status, and for this very reason, it too is implicated in the ambivalences of Franco-Italian relations.

Early clues are evident in the ruminations on war in the first volume of essays: of four crucial anecdotes in the paired essays on parleys during war, two are drawn from the Italian wars, one condemning French military conduct, the other Italian. Though these wars were 40 years old at the time of writing of these essays in the early 1570s, it is clear that the memory of French engagements in Italy suffuses the text. But something changes during and after his visit to the country, a change that is not overt but which can be discerned through subtle clues in the revisions and reformulations through the various strata of the *Essais*. The textual traces of Tasso are one such set of clues.

**Tasso’s romantic dissipations**

Tasso is the most-cited Italian author in the *Essais* (Villey, 1933). But Montaigne appears not to have read his work carefully until the journey to Italy: only one citation from Tasso appears in the 1580 edition; all others appear only in the edition of 1582 and are subsequently revised in 1588 and 1595. Tasso’s renewed presence in the 1582 volume is dramatic: in addition to five citations – four from the *Gerusalemme liberata* (Tasso, 1982) and one from the *Aminta*, Montaigne offers up the Italian poet – unnamed – as the culminating case study in his demonstration of the fragility of human reason at the center of the ‘Apologie de Raymond Sebond.’
More importantly, however, Montaigne’s distinct preference for Tasso over Ariosto emerges in the deletion or shortening of references and citations to Ariosto in the *Essais* and additions instead of Tasso, suggesting that he is taking a definite – rather surprising – stance in the Ariosto–Tasso debate, one that seems to privilege the anxious orthodoxies of the *Liberata* over the sly ironies of *Orlando Furioso*.\(^1\)\(^8\) We might speculate that this shift of focus does not necessarily reflect Montaigne’s own preference for one writer over the other, but rather, that it reflects a strategic choice about the representation of contemporary Italian culture in the *Essais*. The intriguing similarities between Ariosto’s and Montaigne’s ironic styles may not have been especially useful for the *Essais* in their engagement with and interrogation of a certain vision of Italy – one which was better served by the figure of Tasso.

Given that the additions of Tasso in the 1582 edition suggest that they are a measure of Montaigne’s Italian experiences, it is perhaps not too much to argue that Montaigne’s Tasso figures a particular, complex vision of Italy and Italian culture. Indeed, the earliest passage that Montaigne cites, at the opening of the essay, ‘Of not communicating one’s glory’ points to a series of ironic meditations that Tasso’s presence in Montaigne’s text will engage:

La fama ch’invaghisce a un dolce suono  
Gli superbi mortali, et par si bella,  
E un’echo, un sogno, anzi d’un sogno un’ombra  
Ch’ad ogni vento si dilegua et sgombra.\(^1\)\(^9\)

This is a citation of the 14th canto of the *Gerusalemme liberata*, in which the siren charms Rinaldo into an erotic stupor. The passage seems at first glance to express Montaigne’s point about the vanity of fame and reputation. Indeed, Marcel Tetel has argued that this citation inaugurates a meditation within the *Essais* on the relative merits of following a public life versus the pursuit of private pleasures, so that the choice of Rinaldo in Tasso’s *Liberata* is in fact a mirror of the choice that Montaigne himself seems to have faced, as he turned away from public service to the inner world of his study (Tetel, 1992). But in its context, the song of the siren is not a moral call to a higher purpose; rather, it lures Rinaldo away from the heroic martial deeds that bring worldly and moral achievement into the lassitude of amorous retreat; it represents a morally reprehensible turning away from a *vita attiva* to sensual stasis – a dissolution of purpose, a loss of direction.

Ironically, where Montaigne seems to use Tasso’s poem approvingly, he, in fact, scathingly undercuts the very point of the epic’s exhortation to heroic glory, since the essay opens with the following observation:

De toutes les resveries du monde, la plus receue et plus universelle est le soing de la reputation et de la gloire, que nous espousons jusques a quitter les richesses, le repos, la vie et la sante, qui sont bien effectuels et substantiaux, pour suyvre cette vaine image et cette simple voix qui n’a ny corps ny prise . . .
Significantly, Tasso’s siren herself is a vain phantom who leads Rinaldo astray in the Gerusalemme liberata. By aligning himself with Tasso’s siren rather than Tasso’s narrator, and thereby creating a sharp tension between his essay and the context of Tasso’s stanza, Montaigne might be suggesting that Tasso was in fact mistaken and led astray by his own longings for poetic fame. Moreover, if Tasso’s poem urges Rinaldo towards the true ‘fama’ of the crusader, it is Tasso the poet, in Montaigne’s Essais, who is associated with Rinaldo’s infamous turn away from valiant arms towards amorous ruin. A subtle biographic aside may also be at play here since Montaigne may even have known some of the gossip surrounding Tasso’s madness, which was rumored to have been caused by his illicit love for Leonora d’Este, one of the sisters of Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara (a liaison later dramatized in Donizetti’s opera, Torquato Tasso). 20

Such an association of Tasso with the experience and poetry of romantic desire, in contrast to the fame of an active life of public service, is further strengthened by three extended citations in the Essais taken from canto eleven of the Liberata, which recounts the famous battle between Christian hero Tancredi and his pagan beloved Clorinda. 21 In fact, three of Montaigne’s five citations from the Liberata belong to this episode, which provides a parallel plot-strand to the romance of Rinaldo and Armida, discussed earlier. 22 Here again an illicit romance interferes with epic telos, but in a cruel twist, the lovers do not know they are battling each other, and Tancredi only discovers that his opponent is Clorinda at the moment when he has killed her. The combattimento of Tancredi and Clorinda was one of the most celebrated and best known episodes of Tasso’s poem: it was admired for its intense lyricism, the strength of its passion, the energy of its action and for its terrible tragic end. It picks up an epic commonplace (the killing of a beautiful virgin warrior, usually by a hero she loves, or who loves her), and amplifies it into a charged erotic and martial set-piece as the physicality of battle mimics and substitutes the sexual fulfillment that the poem denies; here, the pleasure of poetry stands in for the pleasure of eros.

As Tetel notes, Montaigne locates this doubling of sexuality and textuality in Tasso’s work and harnesses its imaginative fecundity throughout the Essais in various ways. 23 However, this programmatic association of Tasso with romance, desire, sexual passion and consequently, with tragedy, despair and destruction also gestures towards broader ‘national character’ stereotypes of Italy and Italians in the period. In Northern European literature, particularly in France and England, Italians were often associated with two poles – that of Machiavelli and Aretino – with political cunning and fraud on the one hand, and lascivious hyper-sexuality on the other. 24 The two could be seen to converge in the court of Catherine de’ Medici in France, and in this context, Montaigne’s association of Italy’s premier contemporary poet
with a turn away from public duties to the complications and tragic mistakes of erotic intrigue cannot but be seen as a metonym for Italy itself. The Italian turn away from a patriotic and political greatness to petty disputes, erotic languor and sexual appetite became a favorite trope over the late 16th and 17th centuries. More importantly, Montaigne’s Tasso, as he emerges through this texture of citation, participates in the production of a narrative of cultural decadence that would plague Italy from 1550 onward.\footnote{25}

**Disfiguring Tasso: Montaigne’s Italian impressions**

Such strategic ambivalences in the *Essais*’s evocation of Tasso’s poetry make it difficult to read Montaigne’s allusions to Tasso solely as tokens of appreciation and valorization or an instance of the essayist’s Italianism. To do so is to ignore the essayist’s discomfort with the poet’s fate and the anti-Italianism toward which it gestures. Significantly, Montaigne’s famous description of the mad Tasso in the ‘Apologie’ also follows a similar pattern of a turning away from a life of action towards intellectual decay:


Though this passage has become the basis of Romantic depictions of Tasso as a tragic genius, and provided fodder for the rich tradition of paintings showing the imagined meeting of the two writers, most scholars now believe that there was no such meeting (the *Journal* is notoriously silent on this point).\footnote{26}

Whatever the actual circumstances of Montaigne’s contact with the poet, the Tasso of the ‘Apologie’ stands for a particular kind of intellectual ambition, cultural achievement and nobility to which Montaigne may have aspired: Italianate, passionate, ecstatic, sophisticated. He is distinguished by a ‘restlessness and liveliness’ of
mind, by judiciousness and ingenuity, a man ‘closely molded by the pure poetry of antiquity’—the description in the ‘Apologie’ may well be one of Montaigne. Indeed, as Marcel Tetel has observed, Tasso in the *Essais* almost seems to be Montaigne’s alter ego, a kind of Italian Other whose fate Montaigne fears for himself. But this Tasso also exemplifies contemporary Italian culture at its zenith, and his writing becomes representative of what Italy has to offer. It is classicizing, learned, elegant, graceful, but it is also poised on the fine edge between genius and madness, overwhelming achievement and tragic fall. The rise and fall of Tasso’s intellect, as Montaigne describes it in the ‘Apologie’ is a figure for an Italy whose brilliance has, paradoxically, led to decay; whose achievement is dissolved into political fragmentation.

More interestingly, Montaigne does not mourn for this loss or revel in its tragic pathos. Rather, he notes his own irritation and lack of sympathy—‘I felt even more vexation than compassion’ he says—a telling comment that reveals his own impatience and ambivalence toward the phenomenon of a mad genius, or a brilliant, decaying culture. Indeed, at the very end of the *Essais*, in a final C-text revision, Montaigne reiterates his preference for an ordinary humanity over extraordinary ambition or achievement: ‘Ces humeurs transcendentes m’effrayent, comme les lieux hautains et inaccessibles; et rien ne m’est à digérer fascheux en la vie de Socrates que ses ecstases et ses demoneries…’ (‘These transcendental humors frighten me like lofty and inaccessible places; and nothing is harder for me to stomach in the life of Socrates as his ecstasies and possessions by his daemon…’) (Montaigne, 2004: 3.13.1115; Frame, 1958: 3.13. 856). The passions and excessive manifestations of genius do not have a place on the humane economy of Montaigne’s ethical world; it is ‘madness’ to ‘escape the man.’

In this context, it is quite striking that, for Montaigne, the appropriate counterpoint in the ‘Apologie’ to the mad Tasso are the Tupinamba Indians of Brazil:

Ce qu’on nous dict de ceux du Bresil, qu’ils ne mouroyent que de vieillesse, et qu’on attribue à la serénité et tranquilité de leur air, je l’attribue plustost à la tranquillité et serenité de leur ame, deschargee de toute passion et pensée et occupation tendue ou desplaisante, comme gents qui passoyent leur vie en une admirable simplicité et ignorance, sans lettres, sans loy, sans roy, sans religion quelconque.

(What they tell us of the Brazilians, that they died only of old age, which is attributed to the serenity and tranquility of their air, I attribute rather to the tranquility and serenity of their souls, unburdened with any tense or unpleasant passion or thought or occupation, as people who spent their life in admirable simplicity and ignorance, without any letters, without law, without king, without religion of any kind.) (Montaigne, 2004: 2.12.491; Frame, 1958: 2.12. 362)

At one level, the contrast between the Brazilians and Tasso seems to rehearse well-worn oppositions between barbarism and civilization, nature and art, New and Old worlds by idealistically imagining a Brazilian life stripped of the destructive
passion – but also of the brilliant intellectual facility – that drives the Italian Tasso to madness. But in a sleight of hand reminiscent of ‘Des cannibales’ (which this passage echoes almost verbatim), these oppositions are exploded and exploited to produce a kind of moral dissonance: it is the Italian Tasso who becomes the emblem of human fallibility, rather than the ignorant Indians. Here, Montaigne evokes once again those strategic inverted absences that characterize the description of the cannibals in the early essay – they are ‘sans lettres, sans loy, sans roy, sans religion.’ The central internal rhyme of *loy*/roy foregrounds the connection between letters, state authority and religion.29 These were of course the very factors that affected Tasso’s art and his madness, as well as Montaigne’s own *Essais* and his melancholy. Defined by the lack of these elements, the Brazilians, become a dark mirror for the European writers. Despite their fantastic alterity they are now, paradoxically, aligned with the moral and philosophical virtues (serenity and tranquility) most prized by European cultures since classical antiquity. It is, ironically, Tasso in his incomprehensible madness, who seems irretrievably other.

Tasso’s alterity in the ‘Apologie,’ at the very moment of his greatest likeness to Montaigne himself, thus becomes a synecdoche for Franco-Italian relations in the period. Italy was a model for emulation, even as it seemed – indeed needed to be differentiated as – incommensurably other, separated from Gallic pragmatism by the defining line of madness. The connection between Tasso and Italy itself is strengthened if we contrast Montaigne’s famous comment in the *Journal* on the ruins of Rome to this description of Tasso’s mad genius:

> que ceus qui disoint qu’on y voyoit au moins les ruines de Rome, en disoint trop; car les ruines d’une si espouvantable machine rapporteroint plus d’honneur & de reverence à sa mémoire; ce n’estoit rien que son sepolcre. Le monde ennemi de sa longue domination, avoit premierrament brisé & fracassé toutes les pieces de ce corps admirable, & parce qu’encore tout mort, ranversé, & desfiguré, il lui faisoit horreur, il en avoit enseveli la ruine mesme.

(Montaigne, 1955: 103–104; Frame, 1983: 79)

Rome here is metaphorically a once magnificent, now dismembered body. The anthropomorphism of place transforms the human body into a metonym for the land, and suggests how histories of entire nations can be condensed into individual stories. The once brilliant, now dismembered city mirrors the brilliant, now shattered, poet. Like the shapeless works of Tasso, Rome is a series of ruins.

Beyond the corporeal parallels in this passage, however, lurks a sharper observation that is worth further consideration. The reason for Rome’s disfigurement,
Montaigne notes in passing, is that ‘the world’ was ‘hostile to its long domination’ (‘le monde ennemi de sa longue domination’). Though the allusion seems to be the Augustan *imperium sine fine* and its aftermath, compressed into this quick turn of phrase is also an entire history of cultural (and not just political) dominion with particular resonance for the French in the 16th century, who were struggling to throw off Italian influence even as they drew upon it. The act of dismembering Rome’s history which Montaigne attributes here to ‘the world’ – those millions of pilgrims, travelers, tourists, plunderers and fortune-hunters who flock to the city – is, ironically, also what Montaigne might be doing to Tasso.

Ultimately, for Montaigne, ‘Italy’ and all it represents occupies a position much like that of the mad Tasso at Ferrara: it is a local attraction with great intellectual and cultural significance that resonates across space and time, but it remains hauntingly out of reach, tantalizingly available and yet inaccessibly locked away. Rome’s ruins are finally a sepulcher; they too encase and hide the true Rome of antiquity, even though they appear to make the city’s great past accessible for eager tourists. And it is perhaps this paradox of knowability that lurks in the tension between the vision of Tasso in the *Essais* and the *Journal*’s silence on the subject.

On deformity: A Franco-Italian *paragone*

Similar themes of disfigurement – physical, intellectual and metaphysical – come to the fore in ‘Des Boyteux,’ which offers an extended and complex meditation on deformity. It is also the essay in which Montaigne names Tasso explicitly, alluding to his *paragone* of France and Italy. At first glance, the essay’s concerns and anecdotes, which focus on cripples, miracles and the insufficiency of human reason, seem to have little to do with either Tasso or Franco-Italian relations. But its culmination hinges on an association that obliquely theorizes the symbolic connections between Tasso and Montaigne, Italy and France.

As in so many essays, form and content fuse in ‘Des Boyteux’ so that the text quite literally limps along through seemingly disconnected anecdotes as it discusses acts of disfigurement and lameness, beginning with a long reflection on the adoption of the Gregorian calendar and the metaphorical amputation of ten days in the year. When Montaigne finally turns to his stated subject matter, after this extended prelude, he does so with one of his other rare evocations of Italy in the *Essais*:

*A propos ou hors de propos, il n’importe, on dict en Italie, en commun proverbe, que celuy-la` ne cognoit pas Venus en sa parfaicte douceur qui n’a couché avec la boiteuse. La fortune, ou quelque particulier accident, ont mis il y a long temps ce mot en la bouche du peuple; et se dict des masles comme des femelles. Car la Royne des Amazonnes respondit au Scyte qui la convioit a` l’amour: arista cholos oiphei, le boiteux le faict le mieux.*

(Apropos or malapropos, no matter, they say in Italy as a common proverb that he does not know Venus in her perfect sweetness who has not lain with a cripple. Fortune, or
some particular incident, long ago put this saying in the mouth of the people; and it is said of males as well as of females. For the queen of the Amazons replied to the Scythian who was inviting her to make love: “The lame man does it best!”) (Montaigne, 2004: 3.11.1033; Frame, 1958: 3.11.791)

The essay’s anecdotal mode here recalls the generalizing observations of ‘national character’ familiar from travel accounts and descriptions. But as in the juxtaposition of the mad Tasso with the tranquil Brazilians, Montaigne once again produces a montage in which an Italian habit is placed alongside the experience of fantastic alterity (here the Amazons). As in the earlier instance, this juxtaposition also serves to paint Italy as radically other: by textual association within the same frame, the Italians seem to be like the Amazons who, already deformed by self-mutilation, find maximum sexual pleasure with those who are lame. The salacious tone of this passage, which lingers on the peculiarity of sexual mores both actual and fantastic, returns to a now-familiar trope about Italy: as with the citations from Tasso’s romance interludes, this rough proverbial ‘evidence’ suggests once again the expertise of Italians in matters of sexual pleasure.

Significantly however, this anecdote and the detailed reflection that follows it (on just why the Italian proverb could be true in practice), serves to illustrate one of Montaigne’s favorite themes – the inadequacy of human reason, and the fine line that separates it from fantasy and madness. ‘Ces exemples servent-ils pas à ce que je disois au commencement: que nos raisons anticipent souvent l’effect, et ont l’estendue de leur jurisdiction si infinie, qu’elles jugent et s’exercent en l’inanité mesme et au non estre?’ (‘Do not these examples confirm what I was saying at the beginning: that our reasons…extend their jurisdiction so infinitely that they exercise their judgement even in insanity and non-being?’) he writes, in a transition that suddenly brings together Italy, sexuality, reason and madness in a single thought. Here, the question of boiteux, of physical deformity, is linked to a kind of mental lameness, one that is simultaneously over-reaching and utterly insufficient.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Montaigne unceremoniously introduces, in this particular context, the only explicit reference to Tasso by name in the entire Essais:

Torquato Tasso, en la comparaison qu’il fait de la France à l’Italie, dict avoir remarqué cela, que nous avons les jambes plus greles que les gentils-hommes Italiens, et en attribue la cause à ce que nous sommes continuellement à cheval; qui est celle-mesmes de laquelle Suetone tire une toute contraire conclusion; car il dict au rebours que Germanicus avoit grossi les siennes par continuation de ce mesme exercice.

(Torquato Tasso, in the comparison he makes between France and Italy, says he has observed that we have thinner legs than the Italian gentlemen, and attributes the cause of this to the fact that we are continually on horseback; which is the same cause from which Suetonius draws a wholly opposite conclusion, for he says, on the contrary, that
Germanicus had made his legs stouter by continuing this same exercise.) (Montaigne, 2004: 3.11.1034; Frame, 1958: 3.11.791–792)

Montaigne’s reference here is not to Tasso as an exemplary poet, but rather to Tasso as an exemplar of Italy, the Italian who dares to assert the superiority of Italy over France through his reason and his reasoning. But Tasso’s contemporary anti-French polemic stands in contrast to the pro-French conclusion of the classical Suetonius, both opining – significantly for an essay on lameness – on the subject of the health of French legs. It is hard to miss the edge of polemic in Montaigne’s own tone: the entire essay until this point has systematically undermined all claims to knowledge through human reasoning, and thus Tasso’s reasoning too becomes one more case study in the failure of logical justification. What Montaigne does not say here, but clearly implies, is that it is Tasso who is metaphorically lame, crippled by his madness; it is Tasso himself who exemplifies the frailty of reason as much as the two contrasting perspectives on the same subject.

The anecdote also serves simultaneously to highlight and undercut the existence of a Franco-Italian paragone. On the one hand, Montaigne denies Tasso the right to any authority in the matter. The Italian becomes another anecdote in the service of Montaigne’s favorite point about the insufficiency of human reason, both because he has lost his own reason, and because his reasoning gives way to the authority of his classical predecessor. But on the other hand, the anecdote is also Montaigne’s (French) trump card against the Italian Tasso. As Conley (1977: 718) notes, ‘underneath the comparison of nations à cheval we can certainly find proverbial meanings associated with the equestrian arts, from chivalry and horsemanship were construed to be both codes of honor and books of lovemaking...’ In a teasing inversion, Tasso’s disparaging comment about thinness of French legs, suggests, in the context of Montaigne’s long discourse on lameness and sexual gratification, that the French may in fact be better in bed than the Italians precisely because their legs are weaker – after all, le boiteux le fait le mieux!

Such readings of Tasso’s presence in the Essais suggest a conflicted relation with the Italian poet and the culture for which he is an emblem. Montaigne repeatedly seems to evoke Tasso with reverence or admiration only to distance or dismiss him. While Tasso may be a model, he is also a model that Montaigne deliberately turns away from and rejects in this final instance. Italian passion and intellectual excess must ultimately cede to Gallic pragmatism as Montaigne has it both ways. In one version, the weakness of French legs may paradoxically be their greatest strength; but Montaigne also has the last word since the lameness of Italian reason can finally only comment enviously on those healthy French legs.

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Notes

1. Montaigne (2004: 11). All citations from the *Essais* will be from this edition throughout, and will be cited by volume, essay number and page number thus: Montaigne, 2004: 1.2.11.

2. Montaigne (Frame, 1958: 6). All English translations from the *Essais* will be from this edition throughout, and will be cited by volume, essay number and page number thus: Frame, 1958: 1.2.6.

3. The *Dizionario italiano ragionato* notes that *triste/tristezza* also incorporates the late Latin meanings of *tristu(m)*: ‘cattivo, malvagio, malizioso’ (p. 1919). This suggests that Montaigne is playing here on an etymological development in late Latin/Italian rather than identifying *tristesse* (melancholy) with the spiritual malaise of *acedia* as has often been suggested (on the frequent confusion of melancholy and *acedia* see Brann (1979)).

4. Marcel Tetel (1992: 31–49) sees Petrarch as essential to the themes of this essay, particularly its concern with melancholy, solitude and irresolution. He argues that Montaigne’s melancholy is Petrarch’s *acedia*.

5. As recently as 2003, in her magisterial study of Montaigne’s Italianism, Concetta Cavallini (2003: 17) bemoans how there has not been a systematic study of Montaigne’s relations with Italy ‘visant à donner une vue d’ensemble’ (17) before her own.

6. See Cavallini (2003); and Tetel (1992). There have of course been several articles on the topic; the most exhaustive bibliography on the subject is to be found in Cavallini (2003).


8. See McKinley (1989). In a similar vein, see also Cave (1995); and Boccassini (1993).


10. On the subject of Montaigne’s Italianism, see Balsamo (1992, 2001 and 2006); Cavallini (2003); Centro interuniversitario di ricerche sul ‘Viaggio in Italia’ (1991); Giudici (1982); McKinley (1989); Tetel (1992).

11. My discussion of French Italianism and anti-Italianism draws primarily on the following works: Balsamo (1992); Heller (2003); Hampton (2001); Bizer (2000); Hornsby (1998); Lionello Sozzi (2002); and Coleman (1979).

12. On the Italian influence on the young Montaigne, via his father’s Italian experiences, see Trinquet (1972: 91–93).

13. On Fontainebleau and the construction of French identity against Italian influence, see most recently, Zorach (2005).


15. On the French reception and political appropriation of the classics, especially Homer, see Bizer (2011).


20. Tasso’s supposed love for Leonora d’Este is the subject of several famous Romantic works such as Byron’s poem, ‘The Lament of Tasso,’ and Goethe’s tragedy, *Torquato Tasso*. It is unclear to what extent the tradition of a lovelorn Tasso driven to madness
derives from a Romantic origin, and to what extent it may have already been in circulation in the late 16th century.


22. The sixth citation from Tasso in the *Essais* is from the *Aminta* and also focuses on love – see Montaigne (2004: 2.12.454).


24. On stereotypes of Italian sexuality see Daileader (2002); Hoenselaars (1992); Hunter (1978: 103–121); Jones (1991). On the necessity and perils of using the reportage of travelers to Italy as information about Italy itself, see Burke (2005: 15–24).

25. On this narrative, see Casillo (2006).


27. Tetel (1992: 122) for this suggestion.


29. Montaigne (2004: 1.31. 206–207): ‘C’est une nation, diroy je à Platon, en laquelle il n’y a aucune especie de trafique; nulle connoissance de lettres; nulle science de nombres; nul nom de magistrat, ny de superioritye politique; nul usage de service, de richesse ou de pauvreté; nuls contrats; nules successions; nuls partages; nulles occupations qu’oysives; nul respect de parenté que commun; nuls vestemens; nulle agriculture; nul metal; nul usage de vin ou de bled. Les paroles mesmes qui signifient le mensonge, la trahison, la dissimulation, l’avarice, l’envie, la detraction, le pardon, inouies.’


References


