CHAPTER 2

Cicero’s Portion of Montaigne’s Acclaim

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As antiquity’s larger-than-life literary paterfamilias, Marcus Tullius Cicero leaves a legacy that is credited by some early moderns with enriching the renaissance of “good letters” (bonae literae) and by others with inflating and so ultimately impoverishing it.1 One of the most outspoken early moderns (in print, at least), Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) makes no bones in his Essais about his disdain for the father of Roman eloquence. Although Montaigne openly takes sides against Cicero, however, the careful study of Montaigne’s sources published over a century ago by Pierre Villey has made it harder for twenty-first-century readers to take the sixteenth-century essayist entirely at his word. For Villey demonstrates that Montaigne borrowed almost as much from Cicero over the course of his literary career as he did from Plutarch, his openly acknowledged favorite author.2 In light of the work of Villey and others, I will first briefly review the case for and against Cicero in the Essais and then add to this evidence what I take to be, contrary to Montaigne’s protestations, a


Ciceronian feature of his style. The self-proclaimed anticiceronian, as I hope to show, owes at least a portion of his acclaim to a figure of speech called *acclamation* in Latin—a figure of speech that both ancient and early modern rhetoricians regularly trace back to Cicero. My aim, then, is to consider just how much Ciceronian *acclamation* figures in Montaigne’s acclaim.\(^3\)

Montaigne’s objections to Cicero focus about equally on the man and his manner of speaking. A cluster of essays in the middle of Book I (1.39, 40, 41), including “A consideration upon Cicero” (1.40), reduces the Roman statesman to his reigning quality of ambition for renown, his well-documented love of glory. In Book II (II.16), when Montaigne returns to this topic, Cicero is chided once again for his addiction. “I believe that if we had the books that Cicero had written on this subject,” Montaigne speculates about the lost *De gloria*, “he would tell us some good ones; for that man was so frenzied with this passion that if he had dared, he would, I believe, have readily fallen into the excessive view into which others fell, that virtue itself was desirable only for the honor that always attended it” (II.16 Frame, 470, italics mine).\(^4\) Here as elsewhere in the *Essais*, Cicero is identified as the *philotimos*, the honor-lover; but he fares no better as the *philosophos*.\(^5\) His is a “talky philosophy” or “philosophie parliere” (I.39, Frame 183; Villey 248): short on substance, strength of argument and

\(^3\) The Ciceronian aspects of Montaigne’s style were appreciated, albeit without much stylistic analysis, by Hugo Friedrich, (*Montaigne*, trans. Dawn Eng [Berkeley, 1991], 375): “Montaigne loves the pointed short sentence, but he also likes the extended rhetorical period. The legacy of the two types is combined in the *Essais*: the laconic style of Seneca and the discursive, or narrative, broad style of Cicero and Livy. Both types had been widely imitated in vulgar-language artistic prose of the Romance Renaissance literatures. But Montaigne lets neither of these types predominate.” For the more one-sided evaluation of Montaigne’s Senecan style by some of his anticiceronian admirers in the seventeenth century, see Pierre Villey, *Les Essais de Michel de Montaigne* (Paris, 1924), 11, 1204–11. All quotations in French from the *Essais* are from this edition and are noted parenthetically in the text by book and chapter number and page number. For a more recent treatment of Montaigne’s anticiceronianism, see Morris W. Croll, “Attic” and Baroque Prose Style, eds. J. Max Patrick and Robert O. Evans (Princeton, 1966).

\(^4\) Here and hereafter, all translations of the *Essais* are from *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, California, 1957) and are noted parenthetically in the text by book, chapter number and page number.

\(^5\) For Montaigne on the Pythagorean story of the three kinds of attendees at the Olympic games, told in the last book of Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* (5.3) and transformed by Plato into three kinds of love—that of money, of honor and of wisdom—see 1.26 (Frame 117; Villey 158): “Our life, Pythagoras used to say, is like the great and populous assembly at the Olympic games. Some exercise their bodies to win glory in the games, others bring merchandise to sell for gain. There are some, and not the worst, who seek no other profit than to see