Chapter 4

Anger Management and the Rhetoric of Authenticity in Montaigne’s *De la colère* (II, 31)

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Michel de Montaigne did not tire in drawing attention to the fact that his *Essais* confounded received opinion. In his own words, they were to be seen as “paradoxes”, which, in the old understanding of the term, means that he preferred to part with the common doxa and to take a stance contrary to accepted wisdom.\(^1\) At first glance, this seems to apply equally to Montaigne’s reflection on anger, *De la colère* (II, 31), which appears to be at odds with the general consensus on anger management in that he supposedly ‘refuses categorically [...] to suppress any passion’.\(^2\) In what follows I will show, however, that Montaigne is actually in line with contemporary definitions of, as well as concerns about, how to handle anger. He shares with his contemporaries doubts about the individual’s capability of governing the passion and a certain uneasiness about the fact that anger can, at any time and no matter how thoroughly reflected and methodically tamed, get the better of a man. But he is also in line with contemporary opinions about anger management, which is portrayed as a power technique, one that transforms raw affect into a display of superiority. What is unusual, however, is the context to which this use of anger is applied: it is the management of a household, and the case for or against anger is made with a view to the disciplining of unruly subordinates. Here, Montaigne does again largely concur with precepts of how to govern a *maison*, and how to treat the members that are under the rule of the head of the household, namely women, children, and servants. Montaigne’s reliance on classical authors and patterns of argumentation necessarily entails that reflections on slavery are transposed from Antiquity to the Ancien régime, paralleling relations between masters and servants with that between masters and slaves.

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Michel de Montaigne was not the only one to reflect on anger in late sixteenth century France, however the typical focus was rather on the anger of princes than that of heads of households. Anger figured prominently in the pamphlet literature produced in the course of the French civil wars, where both sides not only accused each other of acting out of anger but also took to an aggressive style of accusing and denigrating the opposing party. The fact that the magistrate and diplomat Guy du Faur de Pibrac (1529–1584) pronounced a “Discours de l’ire et comment il faut la modérer” in Henri 111’s Palace Academy at Blois in 1576 has been directly linked to the hardened emotions and the acrimony that had both informed and, tragically, also resulted from the religious wars. From 1576 to 1579, Henri 111 assembled dignitaries, scholars and poets at his court as the patron of the Académie du Palais to discuss questions of moral philosophy, typically listening to short discourses on ethical questions such as whether intellectual or moral virtues were more laudable, whether joy or sadness was the more vehement passion, etc. These were oral events, and we are informed about the speeches delivered only through transcripts that are extant in manuscript, one of them having been ordered by Marguerite de Valois, who was among the participants of the early gatherings.

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4 Sue Farquhar has argued for a causal nexus between the meeting of the Estates General and the choice of anger as a topic, see Farquhar S.W., “‘Toutes passions mises an arrière . . .’: The Emotions in Legal Perspective: Montaigne and the Palace Academy in Blois”, Modern Language Notes 120/1 (2005) S124–S140. Farquhar interprets ‘the discourse on anger as an emergent grammar of rights, intrinsically linked to sovereign “liberties”’ (ibidem S126). In contrast, Robert Sealy simply explains the series of topics discussed in Paris and then in Blois with a view to the catalogue of virtues that Aristotle treats in the Nicomachian Ethics, see Sealy R.J., The Palace Academy of Henry III (Geneva: 1981) 39–81, here 61, as well as 59–81 on the court’s sojourn and the Academy’s sessions in Blois during the meeting of the Estates General.