

# Imagining France, lectures on 16th century poetry and philosophy, semester two (2015)

## Montaigne, Essais

“Essais” — not as we know them — a series of attempts at judgement and to work out how to live — inconclusive, always moving, always ongoing. The subject of these Essais is himself — he writes about what he knows best.

1562–1592 = various religious wars, between Catholics and Protestants.

Montaigne’s use of diagonal strokes, or [A], [B], [C]. Montaigne’s works have various layers:

- 1580 – /– A.
- 1588 – //– B.
- 1595 – ///– C – produced posthumously by Marie de Gournay, his adopted literary daughter.

## L’Exercitation

(p. 43 of the French translation)

Montaigne suffers an accident on horseback and reflects on his own fear of death. He lived in a very dangerous area at the time, near Bordeaux. He was twice mayor of Bordeaux. He was alone on horseback — he did not take any servants with him — but it was a battle-hardened horse. He lacks historical specificity for this incident, not being able to remember when exactly it happened. He recounts how imposing and ugly the horse’s mouth was.

Montaigne shows his feeble side by focusing on his “small” self and “small” horse compared to the huge wars going on.

The French text contains Latin quotations between paragraphs. These give different ideas on life and its meaning. Some of them Montaigne doesn’t agree with compared to what he’s saying, but they lend weight and authority. These reinforce the breadth of his reading and study. The reader gets the impression of continuity of thoughts and ideas in humans — Greek or Latin contains lots of things that strike chords even in this modern world, emotionally.

Montaigne is often trying to achieve a sort of “stream of consciousness” account of events, using very long sentences with lots happening in them. He mentions that this accident is the only time he has lost consciousness, as if it shows *weakness*.

He mentions the body as well as the mind and soul. “**The feeling of physical pleasure must involve the mind too**“, so it doesn’t disappear and instead intensifies — *plaisir intellectuellement sensible*. His graphic description of his journey back home after his accident, where he fills a bucket with blood, emphasises this importance.

Montaigne en Mouvement – Franco-Swiss critic Jean Starobinski: Montaigne slides from *douleur* to *douceur*. This is an example of **paronomasia**. Montaigne realises that death is not all that horrible or terrifying and can be easily slipped into.

In the 1588 edition of this essay, he opens up his bank of quotations with an Italian quotation, to show his breadth of knowledge once again and how it has increased over the years between publications.

Montaigne is shown to love Latin poetry through copious numbers of Latin quotations such as “ut tandem sensus convalwere mei”. Lucretius wrote in Latin on suicide and the nature of the universe: “De Rerum Natura”. Socrates said that “I know that I know nothing”.

Montaigne went through three phases concerning what he thought about death:

- Stoicism.
- Skepticism.
- Epicurean.

The long phrase inside the parentheses (“car je l’avoy veu. . .”) changes tenses many times which evokes his thought processes and his sudden realisation that he was nearing death. He realises that death is a neighbour and not to be feared.

Montaigne uses real-life events (buckets of blood, falling off horses etc.) to explain usually abstract philosophical points of view, such as death.

Towards the end of the volume (page 50): Montaigne loved horse riding and moving. In this chapter, he presents himself as a “noble d’épée” rather than a “noble de robe”.