

ENGL 3000
J. Comas
22 Mar 2018

GENERIC INQUIRY 4 - THE ESSAY AS A LITERARY GENRE

Due: Tue, 27 Mar

Required Reading

"Essay" in *Handbook to Literature*
M. de Montaigne, "Of Friendship" (handout)
F. Bacon, "Of Friendship" (handout)

Written Assignment: Even though Montaigne's and Bacon's essays are written on the same topic ("Of Friendship"), you'll find that these two writers have *very* different styles. **Write a short response discussing which of the two styles you like best.** Also, since we will be looking at how the essay originally developed as commentary on classical epigrams and aphorisms, *look for similarities and differences in the ways that each writer used classical sources.*

Notes on Readings

1. Notes on Handbook Entry

As you read the Handbook to Literature entry on the "Essay," give extra attention to the following:

- Concept of "Informal Essay": According to the editors, how is the "informal essay" different from the "formal essay"; that is, what are the thematic and formal conventions of "the informal essay"?
- Philosophical Underpinning of Montaigne's *Essais*: Unfortunately, the *Handbook* does not discuss the philosophical concerns that motivated Montaigne's invention of the essay; so I will spend a little time in class talking about "philosophical skepticism" and its influence on Montaigne's writing. Basically, philosophical skepticism is critical of people who believe that certain principles are incontrovertibly true, without consideration of evidence or the opinions of others. On the other hand, philosophical skepticism also holds that it is not possible for humans to know anything with certainty. If you're interested in skepticism as a philosophical position, a good place to start reading is the entry in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, especially the section on Pyrrhonism (Montaigne is regarded as a neo-pyrrhonian) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/>>.
- Montaigne used the French word *essai* ("an attempt") to name his writings. How does "skeptical philosophy" help us understand Montaigne's decision to name his writings *Essais*?

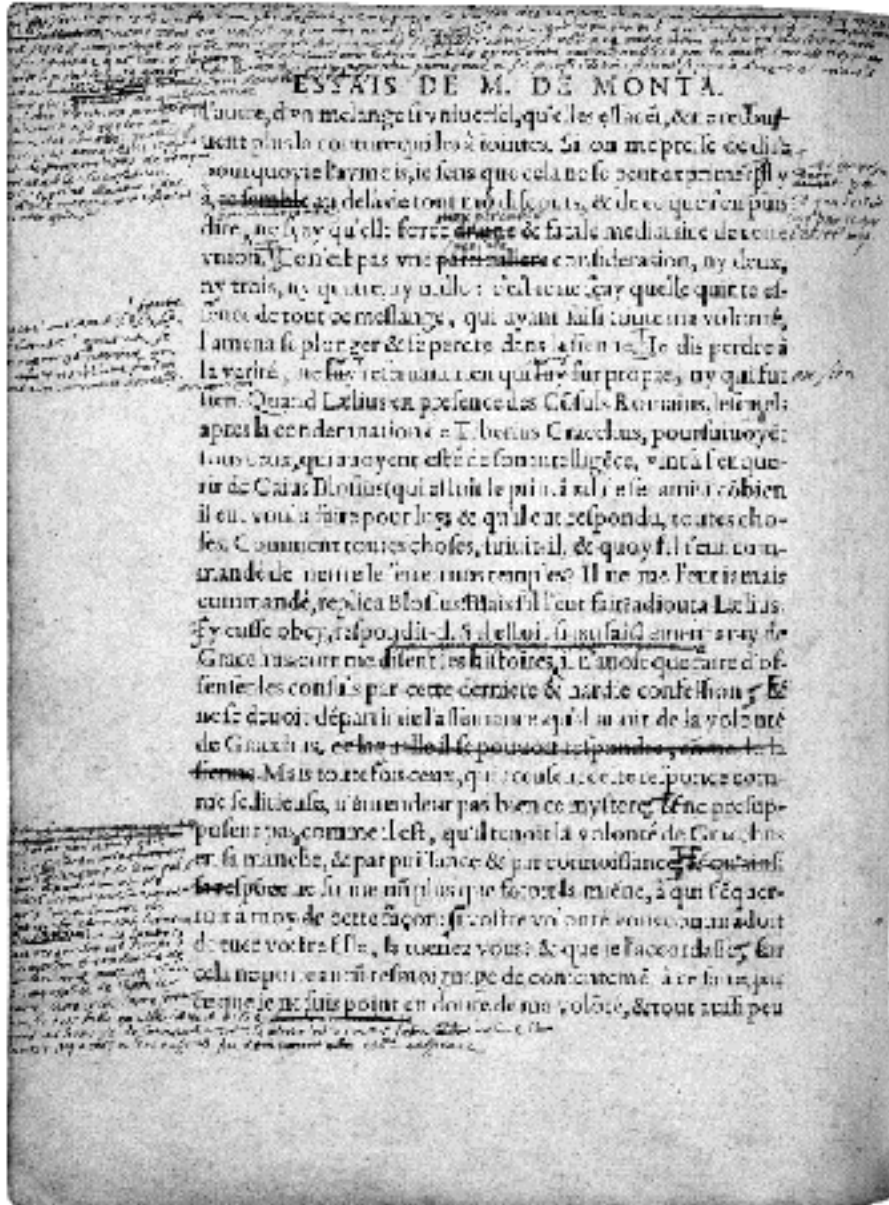
2. Notes on Montaigne and our English translation of "De la amitié"

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) was born on his family's estate, about 30 miles east of Bordeaux. Because of his family's wealth, he received a privileged education (excelling in Latin) which was intended to prepare him for public duty. He served in several positions within the Parliament of Bordeaux. But with the death of his father in 1568, Montaigne became head of the family estate, resigned his position in the Parliament, and began to develop the concept of the *Essais* as a self-portrait. The first edition, in two books, was published in 1580. The full three-book edition was published in 1588, including the essay we will be reading, "De la amitié" ("Of friendship").

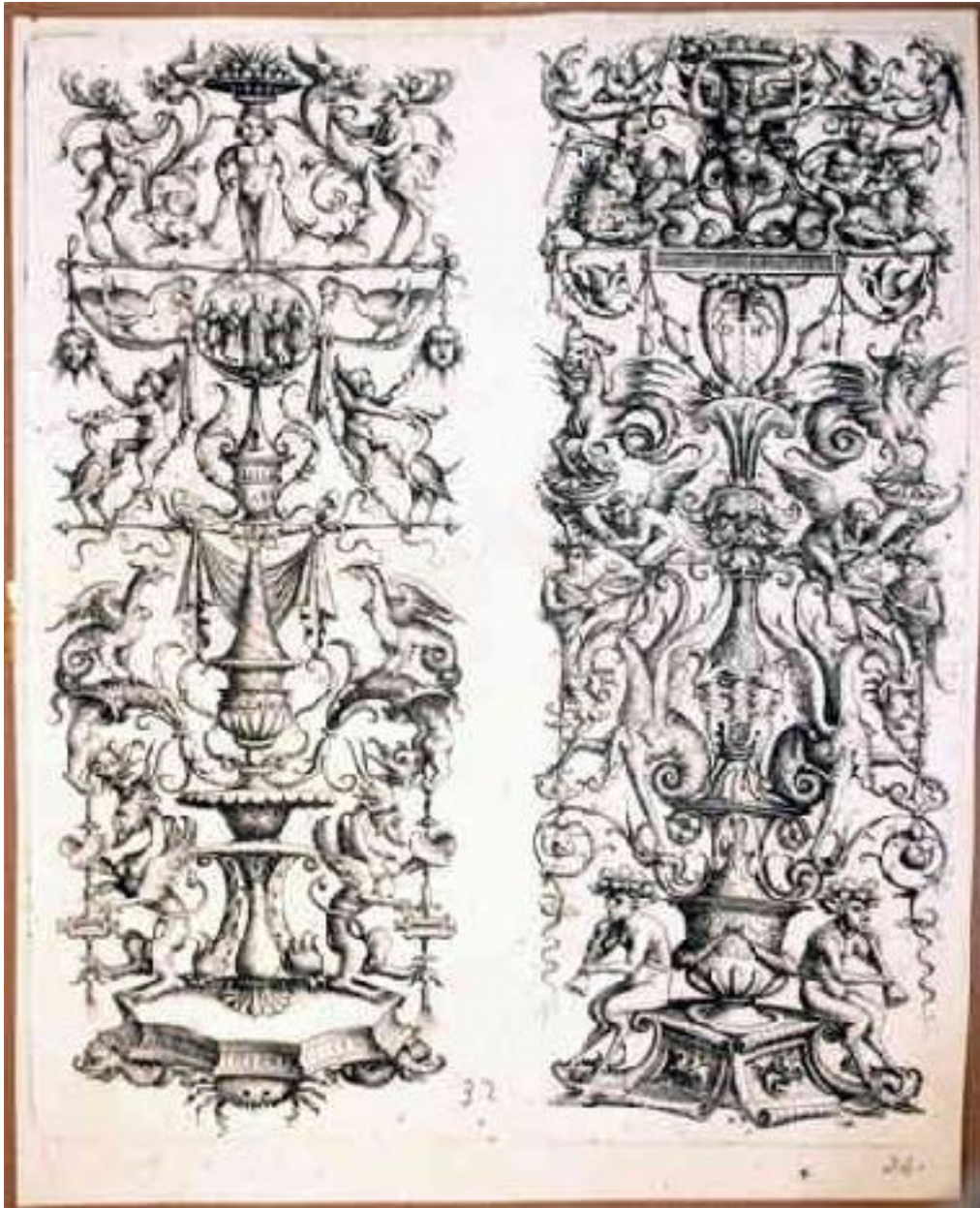
We will use the standard English edition of Montaigne's *Essais*, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford University Press, 1958). Throughout the text, you will see raised, or superscript letters A, B, and C; this has become the standard way of marking revisions that Montaigne made for each of the three editions of the *Essais*:

- A designates material published before 1588;
- B designates material published in 1588; and
- C designates material published after 1588 (Bordeaux Copy).

That is, with each new addition, Montaigne not only added new essays but revised the older essays. In fact, he was still in the process of revising his essays for a third edition when he died. "C" designates those last revisions. Once you read Montaigne's "Of friendship," you will see that the idea of revision (or re-vision) is central to Montaigne's philosophical concept of the "essay." To give you an idea of how he revised, I have included an image of what is called the "Bordeaux Copy," which is a copy of the second edition with Montaigne's handwritten revisions for a third edition. The image corresponds to p. 138 of our translation; and you can see where he added his discussion of ancient Greek homosexuality.



In addition, when you begin reading Montaigne's essay, notice that he begins by comparing his writing to the painting of small "grotesques." To give you an idea of the kind of "grotesques" Montaigne is talking about, I have included an image of portions of framing designs comprised of small grotesque figures:



How does Montaigne's comparison help us understand what he has in mind for his new genre? Finally, notice Montaigne's use of aphorisms taken from classical literature

3. A Note on Bacon's "Of Friendship"

When you read Francis Bacon's (1561-1626) "Of Friendship," you will find references to "fragments" from several ancient Greek thinkers and writers, including Heraclitus. These texts are referred to as "fragments" not because they are actual fragments of books (none actually survived) but because they are found as direct and indirect quotations in texts written hundreds of years later, some longer than 600 years after the originals are thought to have been written.