

## Trial Publication, "à l'essai," and the Rise of the Gentleman Amateur

In the winter of 1571-2 Montaigne began composing the *Essays*, a work that accomplished more than any other in promoting throughout Europe the status of the non-professional man of learning. That same winter, the work's future editor, Simon Millanges, established his presses in Bordeaux. Although the city had housed at one time or another a few dozen itinerant printers, the inauguration of a full-fledged publishing house introduced to the city the interplay between editorial financing and speculation, between local and regional distribution, and between legal protection and the constraints publishers accepted in order to win it. Millanges's business strategies reveal a particular publishing profile to which Montaigne, along with a number of the city's other hopeful writers, responded in proposing *coups d'essai*. These "first works," floated in trial regional publication as a prelude to potential publication through Millanges's partner in Paris, did not so much constitute a genre as foster an interim status for their writers, exploratory and provisional, instead of authorial (classically understood as deriving from the perception of established "authority"). In short, whatever one's ambitions, one could affect to be but a "dabbler."

Millanges's editorial expectations intersected propitiously with Montaigne's own recent and rapid social ascension that had left his noble rank uncertain and his perceived status a subject of contestation. Knighted the previous autumn to the royal Order of Saint Michael (the equivalent at the time of the English Order of the Garter), Montaigne was precariously poised far above his origins in the petty-bourgeois officer class. The *Essays'* ostentatious informality toward Latin culture served to distance him from the scholarly pretensions of this veritable "fourth estate," composed mainly of highly-educated legal professionals. Conversely, his book's claim to enact an art of living, constituted of mental "deeds" rather than mere words, allowed him to elaborate an ambiguous conception of nobility based neither in ancestry nor in learning.

The *Essays'* curious mix of off-handed learnedness and intellectual dignity owes much to the unique confluence of the instability of Charles IX's court—and the erratic pattern of promotion it encouraged—and the tentative, almost dilettante literary status supported by Millanges's policy of trial publication. The literary auditions sponsored through his presses, coupled with Montaigne's need to defend his recent social elevation, conspired to form a role capable of buttressing noble status, redefined in terms of spirit rather than prowess, but conspicuously set apart from Montaigne's peers' assertion of scholarly expertise. These distinct, contingent political and editorial incentives together created the conditions that gave rise to a position that was to prove so influential over the next two centuries, that of the "gentleman amateur" of letters.