In this course, we will read most of the French essayist’s book and explore the historically very diverse interpretive frames available. Inspired by widely different schools of thought and seen by readers as both a scandalously radical and a calculated effort as social self-advancement, *The Essays* continue to puzzle their readers. We will define the essay form invented by Montaigne, its intellectual and aesthetic sources, and examine the ways in which *The Essays* inspired readers over the ages to interpret them. In particular we will ask: what political significance, if any, does the subjective, fluid style of thinking and writing practiced by Montaigne take on in different ages? For Montaigne’s *Essays* have been seen as withdrawal from political life, as well as, at different (and often turbulent) historical moments in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and twentieth centuries, as bearers of political significance. We will scrutinize especially this volatile intertwining of aesthetics and politics in *The Essays*, and ask also if *The Essays* still resonate with the particular entanglement of politics and aesthetics today.

This seminar is taught primarily in French. However, students with a good reading knowledge of French can also participate in English.