The New World and the Other Montaigne’s “On Cannibals”

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Humanities 102, Spring 2020
Class Outline

• Historical Background
  • From the Roman Empire to the Spanish Empire
  • Europe in the Sixteenth Century
• Michel de Montaigne
• “On Cannibals”
“The flood of misfortunes which continuously swept over and submerged the unhappy country of Italy not only destroyed everything worthy to be called a building but also, and this was of far greater consequence, completely wiped out the artists who lived there.”
(Vasari, 29)
“For hundreds of years men had neglected this art and had squandered their wealth on buildings without order, badly executed and poorly designed, which were full of strange inventions, shamefully devoid of grace and execrably ornamented.” (Vasari, 131)
Italy and the Commercial Revolution
The Renaissance and Humanism

• **The Renaissance** - a period of cultural and particularly artistic flourishing in Italy from the 14th to 16th centuries characterized by a renewed interest in classical antiquity and the human

• **Humanism** - a renewed interest in classical antiquity that emphasizes study of and faith in human beings as opposed to an emphasis on the divine
New Trade Routes
Christopher Columbus 1492
The Colombian Exchange
Treaty of Tordesillas 1494
The Tupinambá
Europe in the 16th Century

• The feudal system
• The Commercial Revolution and the new nobility
• The Renaissance and corruption in the Church
The Protestant Reformation

- Indulgences
- The 95 Theses
- The Reformation and the Renaissance
- A direct relationship with God
- Salvation through faith alone
- The Commercial Revolution
The Wars of Religion
Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

- An unusual upbringing
- Military and political career
- A life of learned leisure
- The Essay (*assai* → assay → essay)
A New World, a New Perspective and a New Other

• “This discovery of so vast a country seems to me worth reflecting on.” (105)

• Plato- “But it is not very probable that the new world we have lately discovered is, in fact, that island.” (106)

• Aristotle- “The tale of Aristotle’s relates no more closely to our new lands than Plato’s.” (108)
• “They mentioned three things, of which I am sorry to say I have forgotten the third.” (118)
• “This man who stayed with me was a plain, simple fellow, and men of this sort are likely to give true testimony.” (110)
• “They are still governed by natural laws and very little corrupted by our own.” (109)
• “It should now be supposed that all this is done out of simple and servile bondage to common usage, without reflection or judgement. The minds of this people are not so dull that they cannot take another course; and to prove this I will give some examples of their capabilities.” (118)
It’s All About Your Perspective

• “This is a nation, I should say to Plato, in which there is no kind of commerce, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no title magistrate or of political superior, no habit of service, riches or poverty, only leisurely occupations, no respect for any kinship but the common ties, no clothes, no agriculture, no metals, no use of corn or wine. The very words denoting lying, treason, deceit, greed, envy, slander, and forgiveness have never been heard.” (110)

• “I do not believe, from what I have been told about this people, that there is anything barbarous or savage about them, except that we all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits.” (108)
Shock & Awe

• “I am not so anxious that we should note the horrible savagery of these acts as concerned that, whilst judging their faults so correctly, we should be so blind to our own. I consider it more barbarous to eat a man alive than to eat him dead...” (113)

• “Their men have many wives; the higher their reputation for valour the larger the number; and one very beautiful thing about their marriages is that whereas our wives anxiously keep us from enjoying the friendship and kindliness of other women, their wives are equally anxious to procure just those favours for their husbands.” (117)
“They said in the first place they found it very strange that so many tall, bearded men, all strong and well armed, who were around the King – they probably meant the Swiss of his guard – should be willing to obey a child, rather than choose one of their own number to command them.” (119)

“Secondly – they have a way in their language of speaking of men as halves of one another – that they had noticed among us some men gorged to the full with things of every sort while their other halves were beggars at their doors, emaciated with hunger and poverty. They found it strange that these poverty-sticken halves should suffer such injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throat or set fire to their houses.” (119)

“All this does not seem too bad. But then, they do not wear breeches.” (119)
Shocking Us into Questioning Ourselves

• Description of customs
• Religion and warfare
• Cannibalism
• Polygamy
• Kingship and social inequality

“But they do not wear breeches.” (119)

“Mais quoy, ils ne portent point de haut de cahusses.”
Conclusions

• The Commercial Revolution, the Renaissance, humanism, the Protestant Reformation and the discovery of the New World all interrelated

• Montaigne a French humanist influenced by ideals of the Italian Renaissance who is caught up in the consequences of the Protestant Reformation and thinking about consequences of the discovery of the New World

• He uses the New World to assay his own violent society

• Does Montaigne treat the following topics similarly to the other authors we’ve read so far?
  • Looking back to the ancients for a source of knowledge and inspiration
  • Gaining new perspectives on the natural world and human nature
  • Thinking that we can make progress and make the world a better place
  • Focusing on the human rather than solely the divine