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‘Le Propre de l’homme’:

Reading Montaigne’s ‘Des cannibales’ in Context

Abstract

This article undertakes an ‘embedded reading’ of the term ‘cannibale’ in chapter 31 of Montaigne’s *Essais*, bringing out the preconceptions about both the term and the Brazilian natives which Montaigne does so much to revise. Different understandings of ‘cannibale’ and associated terms such ‘barbare’ and ‘sauvage’ are explored, with radically different implications for ‘le propre de l’homme’ to which such descriptors are linked. It is shown that the French Wars of Religion played a major role in undermining distinctions between epithets designating civilised and barbaric, human and inhuman, and Christian and pagan. Three examples of seventeenth-century discussions of ‘Des cannibales’ are provided in order to demonstrate the long-term effects of Montaigne’s work.

Keywords

Montaigne cannibals ‘le propre de l’homme’ Wars of Religion

‘Cannibale’, ‘barbare’, ‘sauvage’. Any modern reader of Montaigne’s ‘Des cannibales’ must find it odd that the chapter title is brought into immediate juxtaposition with ‘barbare’ and shortly afterwards with ‘sauvage’ without any transition, explanation or prefatory *entrée en matière*. Partly we account for such a brusque approach by ascribing it to the essayist’s tactics: many other chapters – ‘Des boyteux’ is but one example – also make no initial obvious reference to their chosen topic, but build indirectly by the accumulation of examples and practices which supply evidence and argument.¹ In ‘Des cannibales’, the same technique is applied: the essayist develops patterns of association rather than setting out a formal case and in so doing, highlights both the

polysemousness of the term ‘cannibale’ and the network of assumptions and loose equivalences his contemporaries made about cannibals.² By way of understanding Montaigne’s intellectual purpose in chapter 1.31, it is to that larger background of examples of such associations that I shall first turn, undertaking what I term an ‘embedded reading’ which tries to show what historically located readers understood by the vocabulary they used. The purpose of this move, though lexicological in appearance, is in fact to restore to full visibility the value judgements to which Montaigne alludes in his essay, but which he nowhere expressly spells out or lists in detail, and to demonstrate how the essayist deliberately sets out to challenge what he labels ‘opinions vulgaires’ and ‘la voix commune’.³ The approach adopted here is similar to various recent critical perspectives. It focuses, to borrow Richard Scholar’s deft formulation in a related context, both ‘on language *in* history and on language *as* history’.⁴ It also recalls Neil Kenny’s study of ‘word histories’. In his study of curiosity in the early modern period, Kenny pursues a Wittgenstinian line by examining the relations of ‘family resemblance, hovering between similarity and difference’⁵ which his chosen term embodies. As he goes on to explain, the word history attends to ‘a network of family resemblances that was constantly being extended, though not according to any set of definable criteria’.⁶ Although broadly reminiscent of the word history, the ‘embedded reading’ seeks principally to chart the collision of that principle of copious extension with particular historical circumstances which, in this case, will give ‘cannibale’ its special explosive power in Montaigne’s work. This particular angle of attack builds on the research of Anne-Pascale Pouey-Mounou, even though she does not deal directly with Montaigne. She argues that the proliferation and especially the clash of meanings in epithets and descriptors in the French Renaissance gave rise to what she terms a ‘re-qualification’ of the world: meanings became centrifugal, difficult to capture within a single framework. She further claims that this in turn precipitated a change in what was ‘proper’ – both essential and fitting – to the object in question and that this was most notably the case in respect of what it was to be human and what

exactly was 'le propre de l'homme'.⁷ That larger framework of reference adumbrated by Pouey-Mounou is one to which we shall return at various points here.

To begin, then, with De la Porte's entry in his 1571 *Epithetes*, which offers some representative testimony about understandings of the term 'cannibale':

Canibales ou Caribes. Brutaus, cruels, lascifs, farouches, insulaires, dangereux, barbares, nuds, impiteus ou impitoiables, orgueilleus, bazanez ... sauuages.⁸

Tellingly, De la Porte's primary association of 'canibale' is that of cruelty, an idea which occurs in various guises in the list and it seems that the cannibals are considered 'barbares' in view of their cruelty rather than absolutely. 'Sauuages' is the last word in the sequence; whether it is intended to act as a summary of the characteristics, or is just another association, is difficult to ascertain. But it is at least noteworthy that it is not the first idea listed by De la Porte. While the evidence of the list is admittedly comparatively limited, it nonetheless offers a brief sketch of the main assumptions which other writers fill out in more detail and greater specificity. Cannibal cruelty is expressly part of the Brazilian travel accounts of Thevet and Léry, but it recurs in other contexts. When Henri Estienne brought out the first book of his *Prémices ou proverbes epigrammatisez* in 1593, he helped his readers understand his use of the noun 'cannibale' and the verb 'cannibalizer' by providing them with a note linking the two terms as signifiers of cruelty.⁹ A few years earlier, in 1587, Adam Blackwood claimed that Mary Queen of Scots would have received less cruel treatment among the cannibals than she had at the hands of the English.¹⁰ More expansively, Thevet's depiction of Nacol-Absou, 'Roy du Promontoire des Cannibales' in the *Vrais Pourtraits* clusters a series of pejorative terms and expressions around the figure of this king (or kinglet, 'roitelet', as Thevet styles him).¹¹ He is a 'Barbare' who exhibits 'Tigresque cruauté' as well as 'quelque furibonde & Barbaresque inhumanité' in his 'horrible & execrable boucherie' of 67

captured Portuguese prisoners, so much so that even the other cannibals groan aloud and the nearby Spanish hear their cries of horror, if not quite of compassion.¹² The three key ideas – cruelty, inhumanity and butchery – partly share at least one common term: barbarity. Barbarity lies both in the cruelty and in the inhumanity; conversely, cruelty and inhumanity prove barbarity. The animal analogy likewise reduces Nacol-Absou to below the level of the human and the humane, and yet also, for Thevet, testifies to that natural corruption occasioned by sin such that human beings ‘sentre-gourmandent l’un l’autre’.¹³ Even reduced to the level of an animal, Nacol-Absou cannot escape condemnation for behaviour which is an affront to the human. ‘[S]entre-gourmandent’ is the first time in this context that any express reference to consumption has occurred, and it is metaphorical at that, as there is no evidence in the passage that Nacol-Absou ate the Portuguese prisoners or caused them to be eaten. Indeed, more generally, the cannibal was not automatically or uniformly a man eater, and Renaissance opinion on this matter varied. Peter Martyr’s influential work on the New World, which came out more than two decades before Thevet, devotes considerable space to the cannibals from the Christian perspective, with special attention to their man-eating habits, using the Greek term ἀνθρωποφάγοι (man eaters) to describe them at several points in his account.¹⁴ By contrast, Rabelais couples the terms ‘rustiques et barbares’ in chapter 9 of *Gargantua*,¹⁵ while Guillaume Bouchet’s third book of *Serees* (1598) has a short tale relating to ‘Barbares, Ameriquains, Cannibales’ in which he states, ‘Et puis nous les nommons Barbares, rudes, & sauvages: mais ce n’est pour autre chose, sinon que Barbar signifie desert...’¹⁶ No mention here of man eating, but instead, as with Rabelais, ‘barbare’ in the sense of ‘rusticall’ or ‘unciuil’, as Cotgrave translates it, or rather in Bouchet’s case the place where such behaviour happens. In an unconscious parallel to Bouchet’s sentiments, François de Rosières offers a complementary view in his *Six Livres des politiques* of 1574:

Et combien que nous deuions entretenir, & loger les estrangers, pour ce bien qui nous en vient, ce neantmoins les Scythes, & Tartares ont vsé de grande cruauté enuers eux, les mangeants comme bestes. Ce qui a esté fait aussi aux Cannibales, & en quelques autres contrées des Isles occidentales. Iaçoit que ç'a esté plustost par Barbarie, & vn cœur agreste, & cruel, qu'autrement.¹⁷

Cruelty and animality recur but now in a framework which deals with the expectations between human beings. They relate therefore to what is both civic and civil behaviour. 'Barbarie' in this context means the absence of both those qualities. It is the 'agreste' cruelty of the rustic that drives him to act in defiance, but also in ignorance, of the laws of hospitality; the savagery practised by cannibals ('aux Cannibales') derives from an unthinking primitive coarseness rather than, for example, deliberate blood-lust ('autrement'). Other writers agree. Du Plessis Mornay similarly equates 'cannibale' with 'ignorant' and 'barbare',¹⁸ and he is not alone: Pierre Davity thought the cannibals showed 'incapacité des choses celestes' out of brutality and stupidity and that they first had to be made capable of reason before being instructed in virtue, while Louis Le Caron conjoined the terms 'barbare, inciuile & desraisonnable'.¹⁹

Even from this initial inspection of the evidence, Pouey-Mounou's argument about the incompatible meanings which epithets accreted seems to be confirmed by the conflicting early modern understandings of the descriptor 'cannibale'. For some French writers, to be a cannibal and particularly to display cannibal cruelty is not to be human in a recognizable sense. Antoine le Pippre, an early seventeenth century reader of Montaigne, encapsulates this point when he refers to the 'desmesurée, & bestiale cruauté, & barbarie inhumaine' of the cannibals, where cruelty and inhumanity are virtually synonymous.²⁰ Cruelty is thus one of the markers which distinguish the cannibal from the European, the uncivilised from the civilised, the savage from the Christian and the animal from the human.²¹ For other writers, however, the cannibals display a rustic

uncouthness and ignorance and are naturally ‘paganus’ in belief and behaviour because they are ‘agreste’: in both cases, they are rustics. One set of writers thus holds more or less explicitly that there is a human nature and an accompanying standard of conduct which defines Europeans in contradistinction to the inhabitants of the New World. Others take a less restrictive and less censorious view about both the nature and the educability of the same inhabitants; Bouchet, indeed, went so far as to reverse the assumed superiority of the Old World over the New by staging an encounter in his *Serees* between a European trader and a Brazilian native who tries to make him realize his greed and vanity.²² The disparities in French interpretations of the word ‘cannibale’ thus repeat in another form the debate in 1550-51 between Sepúlveda and Las Casas over the rights, sovereignty and the nature of the New World inhabitants; over *proprium* and *proprietas*, therefore.²³ And it is noteworthy that the sympathetic accounts of cannibals in Bouchet as well as in Cholières’ first *Matinée* expressly refer to Las Casas.²⁴

None, however, went as far as Montaigne in challenging the prevalent assumptions of the age, beginning with his scrutiny of the descriptors commonly associated with cannibals. He suspends actual encounter with the Brazilian cannibals until the end of 1.31 in order to interrogate the meaning of terminology such as ‘barbare’ and ‘sauvage’ as applied to them. Yet Montaigne’s initiative has a more than definitional purpose. It serves also to underpin his own history of the cannibals, from Golden Age origins through to modern encounter at Rouen. Moreover, he offers a particular vision of history, one in which the discovery of cannibals is the rediscovery of Classical civilisation. The cannibals’ language sounds like Greek; their love song recalls an Anacreontic ode.²⁵ Displaying valour and motivated solely by virtue, their habits in war are similar to Homer’s depictions of combat in the *Iliad*. In this re-description of heroic *proprium* and *proprietas*, the Brazilian jungle rather than Renaissance France now seems the true heir of Ancient Greece. This is a Golden Age of nature unknown to Plato and Lycurgus, Montaigne

claims, and his choice of these two Greek lawgivers is motivated by the wish to show that the cannibals are themselves governed by particular laws which are not so much man-made as innate. Such laws are also reflected in a social structure which mere savages would not have. Thus, this portrayal of a Golden Age is not mere myth-making, even in the service of a putative history: it is also a picture of the 'barbare' as rustic, 'uncivil' not in the sense of having no social commerce or organisation but in the sense of having neither the complex accretions and formalities of Western society nor the social disaggregation of the truly barbaric. In a now famous description, the essayist extols Brazilian society in terms that rivals Plato's *Republic*:

C'est une nation, diroy je à Platon, en laquelle il n'y a aucune espece de trafique; nulle cognoissance de lettres; nulle science de nombres; nul nom de magistrat, ny de superiorité politique; nul usage de service, de richesse ou de pauvreté; nuls contrats; nulles successions; nuls partages; nulles occupations qu'oysives; nul respect de parenté que commun; nuls vestemens; nulle agriculture; nul metal; nul usage de vin ou de bled.²⁶

The very phraseology of this initial characterisation of the natives, with its insistent anaphoric 'nul(le)', seems to echo Las Casas's similar picture of them, with its repetition of 'sans': 'sans finesse, ou cautelle, sans malice ... sans noises, & remuemens, sans querelles, sans estrifs, sans rancune, ou haine'.²⁷ And anthropophagy, when it is finally described by Montaigne later in the chapter, comes without overtones of cruelty: as one of the essential markers of distinction between the civilised European and the uncivilised non-European, cruelty is the very criterion whose application to the Brazilians the essayist vigorously resists and indeed reverses, claiming that there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead.²⁸ Anthropophagy is even defended by adducing the opinions of the Stoic philosophers, Chrysippus and Zeno (more Greeks, we notice), to the effect that there is no harm done in using the dead as a source of sustenance. So in the first instance, Montaigne's creation of an aetiological narrative

underpinning a cultural, literary and linguistic lineage functions as an alternative to current French stereotypes about cannibals.

Yet as Montaigne was very much aware, ‘cannibale’ was not confined to debates about the social or ontological nature of the native inhabitants of Brazil. The term enjoyed wider currency in his time. It had, for instance, very quickly become a staple in the anti Spanish repertoire. Thevet’s Nacol-Absou is described as seeking to out-Spanish the Spanish by his behaviour. ‘Vn Espagnol ... nous doit estre plus hayssable qu’vn Lestrigon, qu’vn Mammelu, qu’vn Cannibale,’ declared Le Guay in the early seventeenth century, in a string of linked imprecations often found as a collocation elsewhere,²⁹ while Bouchet exclaimed, ‘l’Espagnol par son extreme auarice, desloyauté, & cruauté, a laissé à la posterité le nom Chrestien odieux à tous les peuples de ce nouueau monde’.³⁰ A few years earlier, Jean Crespin exclaimed about the Spanish Inquisition, ‘O mon Dieu, y auoit-il faute au monde de Scithes, ou Tartares, ou de Cannibales encore plus cruels...?’³¹ ‘Cannibale’ could also be used in anti English polemic, as we saw earlier with Blackwood, or it could simply be part of a more extensive vocabulary of invective, as in the following early seventeenth-century example by Pierre de Besse: ‘ames felonnes, cœurs sanguinaires, volonte barbaresques, serez-vous touiours rebelles ... à Dieu, au Roi, à la iustice? Anthropophages, Cannibales, Gelons, hommes sans humanité, Chrestiens sans foy, sans pitié, sans crainte, sans religion!’³² There is nothing in this outburst to indicate the object of Besse’s ire – duellists and duelling. Du Bartas has a similar accumulation of insults: the butt of his attack on one particular occasion is a ‘Cannibale felon’, a ‘Cyclope inexorable’, a ‘Busire’, a ‘Lestrigon’, all four examples here being man-eaters, although there is nothing literally man eating about his object of criticism, a Roman who throws his slave to a lion.³³

However, there were two intertwined contemporary areas in which ‘cannibale’ came to hold special force and emotive power in the French Renaissance: religion and politics. In *Une*

Sainte Horreur ou le voyage en Eucharistie, Frank Lestringant analyses the Eucharistic debates that raged in Reformation Europe and the accusations of the cannibalism of the Mass which Reformers directed at Catholics; as Lestringant amply shows, these debates were re-played during the French attempt at the colonisation of Brazil.³⁴ Yet the term ‘cannibale’ also had currency in respect of France itself during the Wars of Religion. Naturally enough, it refers in the first instance to (rare) actual acts of cannibalism such as the one Léry reports during the siege of Sancerre in 1572-73, in which a child is eaten by its parents. Describing this act as ‘cruauté barbare & plusque bestiale’ and as a ‘crime prodigieux, barbare, & inhumain’,³⁵ Léry comments: ‘[...] combien que i’aye demeuré dix mois parmi les Sauvages Ameriquains en la terre du Bresil, leur ayant veu souuent manger de la chair humaine [...] si n’en ay-ie iamais eu telle terreur que i’eu frayeur de voir ce piteux spectacle, lequel n’auoit encores (comme ie croy) iamais esté veu en ville assiegee en nostre France’.³⁶ Léry’s horror and terror that such behaviour could happen in France derive in good measure from the fact that the very acts which Protestants condemned in their Catholic opponents were exemplified on this occasion among Huguenots themselves. A more usual Protestant reaction can be found in the *Memoires de l’Estat de France* of 1576-77, where Goulart collected an anonymous response to Pibrac’s defence of the events of St Bartholomew’s Day containing the following lament over slaughtered Protestants: ‘Les ornemens du barreau, les perles des sieges iudiciaux, l’honneur des Academies, les colonnes des sciences, la gloire des forts & vaillans, la fleur de la vieillesse, la verdeur de la ieunesse, tout cela fut fauché par la fausse faux de ces faussaires, traistres, & desloyaux Cannibales’.³⁷ There is nothing, however, in this passage to link the term ‘Cannibales’ to literal anthropophagic behaviour. On the contrary, the noun here has connotations of treachery, betrayal and disloyalty, in a connection which we find again in Pierre de l’Ostal’s *Le Soldat François* and elsewhere.³⁸ In this instance, Catholic treachery and disloyalty are distinctively emphasised by parachesis (the same sound in words in quick succession), but it is not till near the end of the sentence that we find ‘faussaires’, which encapsulates ‘fauché’, ‘fausse’ and ‘faux’. Very shortly afterwards, another idea is added: church

bells rang out in Paris ‘pour conuier les bestes farouches à manger les hommes’, who are treated like animals by ‘nos chaircuitiers’.³⁹ The central idea here seems to be that of butchery and massacre, and the mutilation and in some cases dismemberment of dead bodies, all of which recalls cannibal behaviour for Goulart, but takes ‘manger’ in a broader sense than the literal (so ‘lay waste’ rather than ‘eat’). Yet there is a further possible layer of meaning in this passage: butchers (‘chaircuitiers’) were forbidden to serve as jurors in life and death legal cases, as their attitude towards animals might transfer to human beings: justice requires humanity.⁴⁰ ‘Nos chaircuitiers’ demonstrate neither justice nor humanity. This extended implication of the term ‘manger’ is similar to the Homeric-derived notion of the unjust, tyrannical king as a ‘mange-peuples’ who delights in carnage and revels in blood, an accusation Antoine Arnaud later threw at Philip II of Spain, along with the insults ‘mal-heureux Cannibale’ and ‘Polypheme abominable’.⁴¹

A related use of ‘cannibale’, extending ideas of brutality and savagery, is as a general descriptor of moral behaviour or attitude at a time of civil conflict. It is particularly active in the religious sphere, as Montaigne himself underscores when commenting in 1.31 on barbaric actions undertaken in the name of piety and religion. In the same way, the nameless Protestant murderer of Simon Sicot, vicar of St Hilaire des Moustiers near Angoulême, in the 1580s, is simply labelled ‘Cannibale’ and ‘barbare’; the epithets have become his identity.⁴² The *Ligueur* soldier who sacrilegiously tramples the Eucharistic host underfoot at Arquenay in 1589 is no less a ‘cruel Canibale’; he otherwise remains anonymous.⁴³ Other writers were alarmed about what such behaviour betokened about broader trends and developments. By the turn of the seventeenth century, for instance, the historian Pierre Matthieu thought that the bloody civil war had turned the Most Christian kingdom of France into a republic of atheists, and sweetly tractable Frenchmen into Scythians and cannibals.⁴⁴ Complaining in a similar vein a few years later, François de Rosset wrote: ‘Ce siecle ne produit que trop de ces monstres abominables,

indignes de porter non seulement le nom de Chrestiens, mais encore de conuerser parmy les Canibales, & parmy les Tigres & les Ours, puis qu'on n'y pratique point ces execrables meschancetez'.⁴⁵ The disordered brutality of the wars of religion had, for some, erased or at the very least threatened to erase the conceptual distinction between Christian and cannibal and indeed, in practice, had even far too often converted the former into the latter. Similar changes dangerously blurred the dividing line between man and beast or, again, between rational and passionate action, to the consternation of contemporary commentators. The behaviour that they so roundly condemned in New World cannibals was just as true, or even truer, of their fellow countrymen. This sense that cannibals could be found plentifully at home as well as abroad and that water tight compartments of behaviour were not as well sealed as the French blithely assumed proved an enduring source of dismay, if not scandal; taken-for-granted, clear-cut oppositions became uncomfortably unstable.

Such mighty upheavals also have a potent effect on our understanding of 'Des cannibales'. Our gradual realisation is that the very title of the chapter points in more than one direction. Montaigne's immediate initial plunge into a defence of Brazilian cannibals at the start of 1.31 leads us to assume that the title of his essay refers solely to the New World; the cannibals of the title are those discovered by Villegagnon and recorded by Thevet and Léry. Yet this expectation is overturned in the course of the chapter. If the first stage of Montaigne's strategy is to depict the cannibals as being utterly different from Thevet's Nacol-Absou, the second stage is to pick up the resonances and applications of 'cannibale' with which his contemporaries would have been familiar from the literature of the Wars of Religion. Indeed, one could argue that chapter 1.31 as a whole replays the disorientating loss of signifying values, the changes in established patterns of behaviour and the labels by which they were designated, that had become a rooted part of the experience of civil strife in the years following the outbreak of hostilities in the early 1560s. 'Des cannibales' illustrates that situation by paying close attention to the

linguistic and rhetorical forms which it uses and out of which it is itself made. Take, for instance, Montaigne's indictment of French cannibal practices during the Wars of Religion. The passage, just over half way through the chapter, begins with an account of the Brazilians' ritual slaughter and eating of a captive. The essayist then comments:

Je ne suis pas marry que nous remerquons l'horreur barbaresque qu'il y a en une telle action, mais ouy bien dequoy, jugeans bien de leurs fautes, nous soyons si aveuglez aux nostres. Je pense qu'il y a plus de barbarie à manger un homme vivant qu'à le manger mort, à deschirer, par tourmens et par geénes, un corps encore plein de sentiment, le faire rostir par le menu, le faire mordre et meurtrir aux chiens et aux pourceaux (comme nous l'avons, non seulement leu, mais veu de fresche memoire, non entre des ennemis anciens, mais entre des voisins et concitoyens, et, qui pis est, sous pretexte de pieté et de religion), que de le rostir et manger apres qu'il est trespasé.⁴⁶

These words not only enable us to perceive the title of the chapter in a different light, but also re-activate those threads of meaning equally lying back towards the beginning of 1.31. There is now a counter-flow of momentum in virtue of which we can now see, with hindsight, the relevance of particular early details. The retrospective light that is shed on the title of the chapter is one example of this. Another is to be found in the famous early description of New World society, where the phrase 'Les paroles mesmes qui signifient le mensonge, la trahison, la dissimulation ... inouies'⁴⁷ seems, in its immediate context, to reinforce the idea of the Brazilians' rustic innocence and ignorance, echoing perhaps Las Casas, but with a backward glance it also specifically counters just those associations of treason and disloyalty for which, as we have seen, the civil wars used 'cannibal' as a metaphor, and instead imputes such behaviour to 'us', the French. As if to underline the importance of this point, Montaigne even re-states it during his indictment: 'il ne se trouva jamais aucune opinion si desreglée qui excusat la trahison, la

desloyauté, la tyrannie, la cruauté, qui sont nos fautes ordinaires'.⁴⁸ Treason, disloyalty, cruelty: all words for which 'cannibale', in the sense of Brazilian native, was, in Montaigne's view, the radically inappropriate synonym. A further instance comes in his description of the purpose of the anthropophagy: '[c]e n'est pas, comme on pense, pour s'en nourrir, ainsi que faisoient anciennement les Scythes: c'est pour représenter une extreme vengeance',⁴⁹ where 'comme on pense' signals the revision of a standard misconception, marked further by the distinction drawn here between Brazilians and Scythians. For many of Montaigne's contemporaries, the Brazilian cannibal was just the modern version of the classical Scythian. The essayist demurs and puts asunder here what common usage joined. And in the same way that his indictment can point backwards, it can also point forwards, to the culmination of the civil war subtext which comes in the closing scene of the interview with the Brazilians. For 'Des cannibales' concludes its series of reversals by a *mise en scène* in which actual cannibals comment on instances of 'cannibal' behaviour in France – weak kingship, distortion of the 'natural order' so that a child monarch now commands grown men, injustice towards fellow humans by a social elite who are never named as 'mange-peuples', although that is perhaps implied. While this closing episode has been heavily analysed, it is George Hoffmann and Frank Lestringant who come closest to seeing in it the mesh of contemporary reference.⁵⁰ 'Nous sommes donc leurs sauvages,' Certeau comments succinctly about this final scene.⁵¹ Yet his remark, while potent, is too brief: it takes a real, live cannibal to see, and to say, that the values which France supported have been corrupted by the institutions on which it relied.

Let me summarize my argument up to this point. My contention is that there are two strands developed in parallel in 'Des cannibales'. The first is a story of cannibals and classical antiquity which valorises the Brazilians in some of the most prestigious cultural and intellectual terms available in the Renaissance, seeing them as exemplary of the values which antiquity represented. This is a story which ties together ethnography, history, literature and language.

The second strand is ethical. In this second account, consideration of cannibals is used by Montaigne to pass comment on particular aspects of the wars of religion, and the Brazilians themselves, at the close of the chapter, confirm the worst fears of Renaissance commentators concerning contemporary society. Neither of these strands is developed in strict sequence in 1.31; the treatment is partly continuous and partly episodic. Nonetheless, both strands have their own thematic and linguistic coherence; both seek to contest early modern French assumptions about the nature of cannibals and to revise commonly held ideas about the *proprium* and *proprietas* as applied to cannibals and cannibal behaviour. And both strands carry out this task in the first instance by revising descriptors such as ‘barbare’ and ‘sauvage’ before converging and blending in the closing episode of Montaigne’s interviews with the Brazilians themselves at Rouen.

What evidence is there, though, that the change in the descriptor which Montaigne wishes to bring about had any influence on contemporary opinion? As it happens, there is rather a substantial amount of evidence that some of the essayist’s coevals and successors had read and understood the point of 1.31. Among the various reactions, which pick up different features of the chapter, I shall concentrate on those which focus on the finale, betokening an abiding interest in questions of kingship and equality. The first to be considered is that of one of the most prominent of Montaigne’s readers, Justus Lipsius, whose relations with the essayist have been examined by Michel Magnien in particular.⁵² Magnien does not, however, notice a quotation from ‘Des cannibales’ contained in *Monita et exempla politica*. Lipsius is discussing whether succession or election is the better form of government. After quoting a sentence from Seneca’s 90th letter to Lucilius, ‘Naturæ enim est deteriora potioribus submittere’ (It is characteristic of Nature to subject the worse to the better), he continues in this way:

Itaque Brasilienses quidem, cum ad *Carolus IX*. Galliaë regem Rothomagum deducti venissent, valde mirabantur, *Quomodo validi illi & proceri viri* (Helueticos intelligebant)

parerent paruo & tenello regi. Nimirum pro more suo, & sensu, iudicantes: satis læue, quasi à sola corporis magnitudine præstantia esset.⁵³

[And so some Brazilians when brought before Charles IX, king of France, at Rouen, marvelled greatly, *How these strong, tall men* (meaning the Swiss Guard) *obeyed a little king of tender years.* Obviously judging according to their custom and understanding: rather clumsily, as if pre-eminence derived from bodily size alone.]

This is one of the most self-evident quotations from Montaigne in Lipsius, but it serves a quite different function from its role in chapter 1.31. It is in fact conditioned by the Senecan context of the preceding quotation, in which the rule of the best is said to be the original law of nature. Since monarchy is best, the Brazilians, for Lipsius, misunderstand the relationship between the Swiss Guard and the boy king, failing to see that superiority cannot be derived from mere physical size. Lipsius's Brazilians have a limited grasp of the importance of royal succession; Montaigne's Brazilians have an intuitive grasp of the inadequacy of the political situation in France. What had seemed a potent political comment under Charles IX can now be described as clumsy under Henri IV. The twenty-five years separating the first publication of the cannibal's comments in the *Essais* of 1580 and the first publication of Lipsius's work in 1605 have witnessed a sea change in the political fortunes of the French crown and thus in the attitude that the cannibals could inspire.

Other readers could use the cannibals for more edifying ends. Among them is a younger contemporary of Montaigne, Adrien II de Boufflers, seigneur de Boufflers (d. 1622). He is not the only reader of the *Essais* in the Boufflers family to have engaged closely with Montaigne's text: we have knowledge of a kinsman, perhaps a cousin, Jérôme de Boufflers, whose heavily annotated copy of the 1588 *Essais*, with an autobiographical statement dated 1598, was sold by

Christie's in December 2012.⁵⁴ Here, then, we have a pair of early readers who are also members of the same family. Adrien's personal contribution to the story of cannibals is contained in his work *Le Choix de plusieurs histoires et autres choses memorables* published in 1608. His chapter entitled 'D'aucuns Canibales' is an extensive re-working of the whole interview scene from 1.31 in which the cannibals now express admiration to Charles IX about the city of Rouen, but enter a reservation nonetheless, first in general terms: 'ils recognoissoient vn tres-grand deffaut aux hommes sur ce que le monde estant commun à toutes creatures humaines, elles deuroyent par droict, & raison se ressentir toutes des fruicts & aduantages qu'il produict.'⁵⁵ Here the cannibals have become the representatives of reason and the natural law, but their opening comments are a prelude to more specific criticisms which pursue that ethical line. They highlight in particular the 'disparité' and 'inegalité' between the rich with their expensive clothes, servants and magnificent houses and the abject misery of the poor, dressed in little more than rags, enduring the afflictions of heat and cold in a life on the streets and crying out for pity. The cannibals are astounded, as they also are in Montaigne, that the poor do not attack the rich, 'lesquels endormis par les opulences & plaisirs, n'estoient touchez de leur indigence, bien qu'à toutes heures & moments ils entendissent aux portes leurs pitoyables accens.'⁵⁶ The Brazilians are now moral philosophers or even theologians and if one thinks one hears in their words echoes of the Biblical parable of Dives and Lazarus, this is no mistake, as Boufflers' gloss on their comments will discretely show. For this intensification both of the cannibals' role and their observations is matched by the specificity of his response:

Certainement ce nous est vne grande vergogne, que ces gens agrestes despourueus de ciuilité, & qui n'ont autre cognoissance de la raison, sinon ce qu'ils peuuent apprendre de leur naturelle propension: Neantmoins ils font leçon à nous autres Chrestiens, encores que soyons esclairez de la lumiere Euangelique, & instruits des saintes Docteurs qui

entre autre doctrine nous enseignent la charité & à mettre en pratique les œuvres de
misericorde enuers nostre prochain [...].⁵⁷

The remainder of the passage (and also of the chapter) continues in the same theological vein. All have a common earthly father in Adam; Christ died to redeem all; if we call God our heavenly Father, then we are all brothers and the rich should treat the poor well in the hope that by doing so they may avoid the shame of being reproached by infidels (i.e. the cannibals) and so that by a good life they may win back into the Catholic fold those who have strayed from it. With his pointed description of the cannibals as ‘gens agrestes’, Boufflers offers one of the most thoughtful and sustained reflections on the consequences of their words, which are ascribed to the innate natural reason of rustics ‘despourueus de ciuilité’. He provides evidence of the abiding early modern concern to preserve the distinction between civilisation and cruelty as well as proof of the breaches of that distinction which made it difficult to apply in practice or at the very least rendered the distinction troubled and muddy.

It is notable that the cannibals’ observation about the Swiss Guard is omitted here, although the point about the number of men the cannibal chief commands occurs in another chapter in *Le Choix de plusieurs histoires*.⁵⁸ Other writers, meanwhile, concentrate on the political implications of Montaigne’s encounter with the Brazilian. One of his most assiduous and enthusiastic early modern German readers, the jurist Christoph Besold, recounts the first two points – about the Swiss Guard and the discrepancy between rich and poor – in order to stress how human weakness made some men prefer the rule of many, even though, in his opinion, the rule of one prince was best.⁵⁹ In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton recalled that ‘Montaigne, in his Essayes, speaks of certain Indians in France, that being asked how they liked the country, wondered how a few rich men could keep so many poore men in subjection, that they did not cut their throats’.⁶⁰ Towards the end of the seventeenth century, book 3 of

Pufendorf's *De Jure naturae et gentium* of 1672 remembered the same passage, among very many from Montaigne in that work:

Multo minus autem probari potest effatum illius Americani ex nova Francia temporibus Caroli IX. qui interrogatus, quid sibi singulare imprimis in Gallia videretur, inter alia & hoc dixit: quod, cum alii in omnium rerum abundantia sint constituti, alii contra cum summa inopia conflictati ostiatim stipem quaerant, hi non istos invaderent, & bona iisdem eriperent.⁶¹

[Much less can approval be given to the assertion of that American from New France in the time of Charles IX who when asked what he thought especially unusual in France, said this, among other things: that, seeing that some people enjoyed an abundance of goods and others by contrast, under crushing need, went begging alms from door to door, the latter did not attack the former and take their property from them.]

Pufendorf thought this an exceedingly bad suggestion in that it introduced the dimension of envy into the social bond and threatened to overturn what he termed the equality of right, that is the obligation to the social life which equally binds all humans and which imposes on all parties a respect for the social standing of each. Civic life, in other words, is not and cannot be synonymous for Pufendorf with what the cannibals judge to be the law of nature. Much later on, in book 8 of *De Jure*, Pufendorf adduces the passage about the Swiss Guard, with whose sentiments again he disagrees, on the grounds that the capacity to rule cannot be equated merely with size or strength – thus independently coming to the same view as Lipsius.⁶² Even though Pufendorf takes issue with Montaigne's cannibals on both occasions, he nonetheless bears witness to the longevity of the debate they provoked.

In conclusion, it would be inaccurate to deny that ‘cannibale’ continues to hold its popular associations of cruelty, barbarity and savagery in early modern France, particularly in polemic and invective. However, an embedded reading, as I call it, also reveals that what alter or are at least strongly questioned as a result of Montaigne’s intervention are attitudes towards cruelty; issues of natural law, justice and equality; the shape and nature of kingship; and the relative status of Christians and cannibals. What was proper – characteristic of and appropriate to – Christian behaviour proved a notably long-lived feature of the debate, skewing the assumed congruence between identity and ethos, where identity is synonymous, in this respect, with the faith-orientations of France, whether Catholic or Protestant. For it was precisely the associative power of the term ‘cannibale’ that proved most explosive. Debate raged not only about the attributes of cannibalism, but also about who could be described as cannibalistic; who could be properly subsumed under this term and how also, most dangerously, it could contaminate the very distinctions that produced it. In respect of its Eurocentric assumptions of civilisation, reason and religion, ‘le propre de l’homme’ could never to be quite the same again.

Word count (including *Abstract*): 7515

¹ On this problem in Montaigne, see André Tournon, ‘Tout dire ou tout indiquer’, *RHLF*, 88 (1988), pp. 923-33.

² For the wider background here, see in general Cătălin Arramescu, *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*, translated by Alistair Ian Blyth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) and in particular Frank Lestringant, *Le Cannibale. Grandeur et décadence* (Paris: Perrin, 1994); *Une Sainte Horreur, ou le voyage en Eucharistie, XVI^e-XVII^e siècles* (Paris: PUF, 1996); *Le Huguenot et le sauvage. L’Amérique et la controverse coloniale, en France, au temps des guerres de religion*, 3rd edition (Geneva: Droz, 2004).

³ *Les Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, edited by Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier (Paris: PUF, 1965), p. 202.

⁴ Richard Scholar, ‘Introduction’ in *Renaissance Keywords*, edited by Ita Mac Carthy (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), p. 2.

⁵ Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See her *Panurge comme pois en lard. Paradoxe, scandale et propriété dans le ‘Tiers Livre’* (Geneva: Droz, 2013). For another approach, not concentrating on the role of descriptors, see *Montaigne et la question de l’homme*, edited by Marie-Luce Demonet (Paris: PUF, 1999).

⁸ Maurice de la Porte, *Les Epithetes* (Paris: Nicolas Buon, 1571), f. 45^v.

⁹ Henri Estienne, *Prémices* ([Geneva: Henri Estienne], 1593), p. 148.

¹⁰ Adam Blackwood, *Martyre de la Royne d’Ecosse* (Edinburgh: Jean Nafeild, 1587), p. 435.

¹¹ André Thevet, *Les Vrais Pourtraicts et vies des hommes illustres grecs, latins et payens* (Paris: Veuve Kerver and Guillaume Chaudiere, 1584), II, f. 650^v.

¹² Thevet, II, f. 651^r.

- ¹³ Thevet, II, f. 651^r. Cf. Lestringant, *Une Sainte Horreur*, p. 63: ‘D’emblée, le cannibalisme est donc perçu comme signe d’un dérèglement de l’ordre universel, dont l’homme pécheur est responsable’.
- ¹⁴ Peter Martyr, *De rebus oceanis & orbe nouo decades tres* (Basle: Bebel, 1533), ff. 19D, 24B, 26B, 33C, 49B, 53C, 65D.
- ¹⁵ Rabelais, *Gargantua*, in *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Mireille Huchon with François Moureau, ‘Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’ (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 29.
- ¹⁶ Guillaume Bouchet, *Les Serées* (Paris: Adrian Perier, 1598), bk 3, f. 316^r.
- ¹⁷ François de Rosières, *Six Livres des politiques, contenant l’origine et estat des cités* (Reims: Jean de Foigny, 1574), f. 75^v.
- ¹⁸ Philippe Du Plessis Mornay, *De la verité de la religion chrestienne* (Antwerp: Christofle Plantin, 1581), p. 369.
- ¹⁹ Pierre Davity, *Les Estats, empires et principantez du monde* (Paris: Pierre Chevalier, 1616), p. 318; Louis Le Caron, *Pandectes ou digestes du droit françois* (Lyon: Jean Veyrat, 1593), p. 394.
- ²⁰ Antoine Le Pippre, *Intentions morales, civiles et militaires* (Antwerp: Pierre and Jean Bellere, 1625), p. 733.
- ²¹ On the distinctions between human and animal, see Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals. Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002).
- ²² Bouchet, f. 315^{r-v}.
- ²³ See Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and Empires: Europeans and the Rest of the World, from Antiquity to the Present* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), pp. 77-79 and *Spanish Imperialism and the Political Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 13-36 (pp. 32-33 for Las Casas).
- ²⁴ Bouchet, f. 316^v; Nicolas de Cholières, *Les Neuf Matinees* (Paris: Jean Richer, 1585), p. 5.
- ²⁵ Montaigne, p. 213.
- ²⁶ Montaigne, p. 206.
- ²⁷ Batholomé de Las Casas, *Tyrannies et cruantez des Espagnols*, translated by Jacques de Migrode (Antwerp: François Ravelenghien, 1579), pp. 7-8.
- ²⁸ Montaigne, p. 209.
- ²⁹ Guillaume le Guay, *Alliances du Roy avec le Turc, et autres* (Paris: Toussaint du Bray, 1626), p. 215; for the collocation, see Louis Richeome, *Tres-humble Remonstrance et requeste des religieux de la Compagnie de Jesus* (Douay: Baltasar Bellere, 1599), p. 25 and François Bonald, *Réponse apologétique à l’Anti-Caton et à ceux de sa suite* (Au Pont: Par l’imprimeur de l’Université, 1610), p. 300.
- ³⁰ Bouchet, f. 317^r.
- ³¹ Jean Crespin and Simon Goulart, *Histoire des martyrs* (s.l., s.n., 1608), f. 484^v.
- ³² Pierre de Besse, *Premieres Conceptions theologiques sur le Caresme* (Paris: Nicolas du Fossé, 1606), p. 82.
- ³³ Guillaume Salluste du Bartas, *Œuvres* (Paris: Jean de Bordeaux, 1611), p. 275 and nn. 60-63.
- ³⁴ Lestringant, *Une Sainte Horreur*, esp. pp. 61-82.
- ³⁵ Jean de Léry, *Histoire memorable de la ville de Sancerre* (s.l., s.n., 1574), pp. 149 and 146 respectively. The incident was also reported in Florimond de Raemond, *L’Anti-Christ* (Lyon: Jean Pillehotte, 1597), p. 96.
- ³⁶ Léry, p. 147.
- ³⁷ [Simon Goulart,] *Memoires de l’estat de France sous Charles IX*, 2nd edition (Meidelbourg: Henry Wolf, 1578), I, f. 630^v.
- ³⁸ Pierre de l’Ostal, *Le Soldat François* (s.l., s.n., 1604), p. 50.
- ³⁹ [Goulart], I, f. 631^r.
- ⁴⁰ Fudge, p. 132. This interpretation was suggested by one of the anonymous *FMLS* readers.
- ⁴¹ Antoine Arnauld, *La Premiere Philippique, à la France* (Lyon: Claude Morillon, 1594), p. 30.
- ⁴² Claude Caron, *L’Antechrist demasqué* (Tournon: Guillaume Linocier, 1589), p. 194. The scene of Sicot’s torture is pictured and described in *Le Théâtre des cruautés de Richard Verstegen (1587)*, edited by Frank Lestringant (Paris: Editions Chandeigne, 1995), pp. 95-96.
- ⁴³ Anon., *Le Politique François*, (s.l., s.n., 1605), p. 97. The same incident is related, though without the epithet ‘Cannibale’, in Jean de Montlyard’s continuation of Jean de Serres’ *Inventaire general de l’histoire de la France* (Paris: s.n., 1600), III, pp. 1739-40 and also in De Serres’ *Recueil des choses memorables auenues en France*, 2nd edition (s.l., s.n., 1598), p. 695.
- ⁴⁴ Pierre Matthieu, *Histoire des derniers troubles de France*, 2nd edition (s.l., s.n., 1600), f. 95^v.
- ⁴⁵ François de Rosset, *Les Histoires memorables* (Paris: Pierre Chevalier, 1619), p. 609.
- ⁴⁶ Montaigne, p. 209.
- ⁴⁷ Montaigne, p. 206.
- ⁴⁸ Montaigne, p. 210.
- ⁴⁹ Montaigne, p. 209.
- ⁵⁰ Lestringant, *Le Huguenot et le sauvage*, chap. 4, ‘Le Brésil de Montaigne: Le chapitre “Des cannibales” (1580)’, pp. 205-26; George Hoffmann, ‘Anatomy of the Mass: Montaigne’s “Of Cannibals”’, *PMLA* 117/2 (2002), pp. 207-21.
- ⁵¹ Michel de Certeau, ‘Le Lieu de l’autre. Montaigne, “Des cannibales”’, *Œuvres et critiques*, 8, 1-2 (1983), pp. 59-72 (p. 69).
- ⁵² Michel Magnien, ‘Montaigne et Juste Lipse: Une double méprise?’ in *Juste Lipse (1547-1606) en son temps*, edited by Christian Mouchel (Paris: Champion, 1996), pp. 423-52.

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- ⁵³ Justus Lipsius, *Monita et exempla politica* (Paris: Pierre Chevalier, 1605), f. 62^v.
- ⁵⁴ Christie's, Paris, sale 3534, 12-13 December 2012, lot 91: <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/books-manuscripts/montaigne-michel-de-5631903-details.aspx?intobjectid=5631903> consulted 27 July 2015.
- ⁵⁵ Adrien de Boufflers, *Le Choix de plusieurs histoires & autres choses memorables* (Paris: Pierre Mettayer, 1608), pp. 900-901.
- ⁵⁶ Boufflers, p. 901.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Boufflers, p. 423.
- ⁵⁹ Christoph Besold, *Principium et finis politicae doctrinae* (Strasbourg: Heirs of Zetzner, 1625), pp. 225-26.
- ⁶⁰ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford, printed for Henry Cripps, 1638 [first edition: 1621]), Part 1, section 2, p. 158.
- ⁶¹ Samuel von Pufendorf, *De Jure naturae et gentium libri octo*, 2nd edition (Frankfurt: Friderich Knoch, 1684 [first edition: 1672]), p. 342.
- ⁶² Pufendorf, p. 1226.