The Empire of the Turk

The Turks are of nature great observators of their false laws, slaves unto their lords, good soldiers, both on foot and on horseback, patient in labour, sparing in their food, and for the rest very inconstant.

Barbary and Biledugerid

The people are generally all tawny, moors, very sturdy and strong of body. The citizens are skillful in architecture and the mathematics, and other sciences, as by their buildings may be judged. They are good of nature (so they were Christians) without dissimulation, loving the truth, and observing their promises with all faith. They are very jealous of their wives, ambitious, greedy, and covetous of wealth, and therefore are great merchants.

**Michel de Montaigne (1533–92)**

*The essays or morall, politike and millitarie discourses*, translated by John Florio (London: Val. Sims, 1603)

Source: Free online edition via http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/montaigne/

Michel de Montaigne is best known for his *Essays*, first published in 1580, which engage with traditional humanist concerns (education, morality, war, law), but are particularly interesting for their tolerance and relativism. Montaigne’s denunciation of the burning of witches and the maltreatment of American Indians attempts to counter the dogmatism of his age, though his relativism sometimes worked by circulating stereotypes such as those about the simplicity and unworldliness of Native Americans.

Keywords: Cannibalism—Widow Burning—New World Cities—New World Innocence—Barbarism

Of the Cannibals

Now to return to my purpose I find . . . there is nothing in [Brazil] that is either barbarous or savage, unless men call that barbarism which is not common to them. . . . Those nations seem therefore so barbarous unto me, because they have received very little fashion from human wit, and are yet near their original naturality. The laws of nature do yet command them which are but little bastardized by ours, and that with such purity, as I am sometimes grieved the knowledge of it came no sooner to light, at what time there were men that better than we could have judged of it. . . . It is a nation, would I answer *Plato*, that hath no kind of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate, nor of politic superiority; no use of service, of riches or of poverty; no contracts, no
successions, no partitions, no occupation but idle; no respect of kindred, but common, no apparel but natural, no manuring of lands, no use of wine, corn, or metal. The very words that import lying, falsehood, treason, dissimulation, covetousness, envy, detraction, and pardon, were never heard of amongst them. How dissonant would he find his imaginary common-wealth from this perfection? . . .

They war against the nations that lie beyond their mountains, to which they go naked, having no other weapons than bows or wooden swords. . . . Every victor brings home the head of the enemy he hath slain as a trophy of his victory, and fasteneth the same at the entrance of his dwelling place. After they have long time used and entreated their prisoners well, and with all commodities they can devise, he that is the master of them, summoning a great assembly of his acquaintance, tieth a cord to one of the prisoners arms, by the end whereof he holds him fast, with some distance from him, for fear he might offend him, and giveth the other arm, bound in like manner, to the dearest friend he hath, and both in the presence of all the assembly kill him with swords: which done, they roast and then eat him in common, and send some slices of him to such of their friends as are absent. It is not, as some imagine, to nourish themselves with it (as anciently the Scythians wont to do), but to represent an extreme and inexpiable revenge. Which we prove thus: some of them perceiving the Portugales, who had confederated themselves with their adversaries, to use another kind of death when they took them prisoners, which was, to bury them up to the middle, and against the upper part of the body to shoot arrows, and then being almost dead, to hang them up, they supposed, that the people of the other world (as they who had sowed the knowledge of many vices amongst their neighbors, and were much more cunning in all kinds of evils and mischief than they) undertook not this manner of revenge without cause, and that consequently it was more smartful and cruel than theirs, and thereupon began to leave their old fashion to follow this. I am not sorry we note the barbarous horror of such an action, but grieved, that prying so narrowly into their faults we are so blinded in ours. I think there is more barbarism in eating men alive, than to feed upon them being dead; to mangle by tortures and torments a body full of lively sense, to roast him in pieces, and to make dogs and swine to gnaw and tear him in mammocks (as we have not only read, but seen very lately . . . not amongst ancient enemies, but our neighbors and fellow-citizens; and which is worse, under pretence of piety and religion) than to roast and eat him after he is dead.

Of Virtue

A late writer affirmeth that himself hath seen this custom highly reputed in the new discovered East Indies, where not only the wives are buried with their husbands, but also such slaves as he hath enjoyed, which is done after this manner. The husband being deceased, the widow may, if she will (but few do it), request two or three months’s space to dispose of her business. The day come, adorned as a sumptuous bride, she mounteth on horseback,