

On Cannibals: Caesar, Montaigne, and the Anxiety of Imperialism

In his essay "On Cannibals" (Des Cannibales), Michel de Montaigne alludes to his French ancestors who "in the town of Alesia besieged by Caesar ... resolved to stave off the hunger caused by that siege with the bodies of old men, women, and others unfit for combat" (en utilisant les corps des vieillards, des femmes et autres personnes inutiles au combat). That incident is reported by Caesar himself (BG 7.77), who attributed the said resolution to a Gallic noble named (this once and nowhere else) "Critognatus."

But just as "Critognatus" is a Caesarian invention, so cannibalism is a commonplace of ancient siege descriptions, which, in Caesar's rendition, carries strangely comic undertones – as if the Roman general looked for comic relief. Montaigne's essay similarly contains both fictive and comic elements; and a comparison between the two texts will reveal how each reflects an uneasy awareness of the power differential between the imperialistic culture and the oppressed.

LECTURE BY

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MORE INFO

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Illustration: Francisco Goya,
"Saturn Devouring One of His Children", 1819 and 1823



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