CHAPTER FIVE

CANNIBALISM AND ABSOLUTISM

In the *Two Treatises* Locke quotes a long passage from Garcilaso de la Vega’s *Royal Commentary*. Apart from the quotation he takes from the theologian Richard Hooker, it is the longest quotation he uses in the entire work, which gives it a certain prominence. The passage is a vivid, and rather lurid, description of cannibalism:

In Peru, Garcilaso claimed,

> they had a publick Shambles of Man’s Flesh and their madness herein was to that degree, that they spared not their own Children which they had Begot on Strangers taken in War; For they made their Captives their Mistresses and choisly nourished the Children they had by them till about thirteen Years old they butcher’d and Eat them.

This would seem to entirely substantiate the suggestion that Locke derived a negative view of Native Americans from his reading of travel books. Here is Garcilaso denigrating the inhabitants of Peru and Locke places great emphasis on it. But as we have already seen in the previous chapter Garcilaso did not have a negative view of Native Americans. Quite the opposite, he wished to prove the Incas the equals or even superiors of the Spanish. Why then did Garcilaso present this image of cannibalism if his aim was to idealise the Native Americans? The answer is that Garcilaso wrote about American cannibalism in this way because he attributed the custom to the pre-Inca inhabitants of Peru and credited his own people, the Incas, with abolishing it.

Garcilaso may have had his reasons for writing about cannibalism in the way that he did, but Locke’s reasons are another matter. Locke’s choice of Garcilaso’s description of cannibalism seems all the stranger when it is set against the views of other writers that he had in his

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collection who moderated their condemnation of cannibalism among non-European peoples by attempting to put the practice in its social context or by comparing it to the even more reprehensible behaviour of Europeans. The matter is not, therefore, a straightforward one and we need to examine it a little more closely.

Montaigne’s Essays, a book which Locke owned both in French and English, cannot strictly be categorised as travel literature, but in On Cannibals he discussed the Tupinamba of Brazil. His knowledge of Brazil was extensive. He had a collection of Brazilian artefacts and he had himself spoken to Tupinamba, whom he had met in Rouen, when they were presented to King Charles IX. He had listened to their music and sampled their food. What he could learn from them was obviously limited by the language barrier, but he had another source of information, as he explained.

I long had a man in my house that lived ten or twelve years in the New World, discovered in these latter days, and in that part of it where Villegaignon landed, which he called Antarctic France.4

This was the same colony about which Jean de Léry wrote. The long period that Montaigne’s man had spent in Brazil suggests that he was one of the “Norman interpreters” who lived among the local people.5 Montaigne regarded him as a reliable witness because he was, “a plain ignorant fellow, and therefore more likely to tell the truth.”6 So impressed was Montaigne by what he learnt of the native Brazilians from this man that he thought their society was close to that of the golden age described by the ancient Greeks and surpassed that imagined by Plato in his Republic. But the people in this near perfect world were in the habit of eating one another.

Cannibalism had a peculiar horror for Christian Europeans, because they believed that the body would be physically resurrected to appear before Christ on judgement day. If the corpse was desecrated in any way, but particularly if it was consumed, it might jeopardise the soul’s future in the after-life. Montaigne’s response to cannibalism was heavily influenced by the experience of the French wars of religion when such

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