In the early modern and modern reflections on the concept of barbarian—from Shakespeare, Rousseau, and Chateaubriand to Lévi-Strauss and Todorov—Montaigne’s essay “On the Cannibals” (“Des Cannibales”) plays a key role because of the far-reaching and subversive relativism it preaches. Such a key role might cultivate the assumption that this canonical text delivers a transparent and logically conclusive argument on the subject. However, this turns out not to be the case: Montaigne’s essay is an open text, from which its readers always freely drew inspiration for their own thinking, as can be seen in the numerous but very diverse early modern readers’ reactions. In this essay, I will analyze in more detail the very unconventional way in which Montaigne gives structure to this essay. Starting with the essay’s abrupt closing sentence, I will take into account the early modern readers’ responses insofar as they provide information on the argumentative operation of the essay.

Naked Indians, Trousered Gauls

The sentence that closes the essay “On the Cannibals”—“Tout cela ne va pas trop mal: mais quoy? Ils ne portent point de haut de chausses” (Montaigne 2007, 221) (“Not at all bad, that. – Ah! But they wear no breeches” Montaigne 1991, 241) is famous. It forms the unexpected and ironic pointe of this paradoxical encomium that seeks to demonstrate, against all evidence (para-doxa ‘against the conventional opinion’), that the Indians of Brazil—the “cannibals”—are not barbarians, or at least are no more barbarian than we are. The argumentation, carefully constructed (despite an apparent disorder, as we shall see), collapses by this concluding remark that
Montaigne puts, as it were, into the mouth of a hypothetical reader who remains deaf to all of the arguments advanced by the author. Montaigne has used similar devices elsewhere in this essay and in other essays on the xenophobic prejudices of his compatriots. Here are a few examples, in which I have emphasized the ironic interjections:

*it is indeed the case that we have no other criterion of truth or right-reason than the example and form of the opinions and customs of our own country. There we always find the perfect religion, the perfect polity, the most developed and perfect way of doing anything!* (Montaigne 1991, 231)

*Indeed, until their latest breath, they [the captured Indians versus their torturers] never stop braving them and defying them with word and look. It is no lie to say that these men are indeed savages—by our standards; for either they must be or we must be: there is an amazing gulf between their souls and ours.* (239)

*Wherever they [the French travelers] go they cling to their ways and curse foreign ones. If they come across a fellow-countryman in Hungary, they celebrate the event: they are, hobnobbing and sticking together and condemning every custom in sight as barbarous. And why not barbarous since they are not French!* (1115)

However, the sentence that closes the text “On the Cannibals” has a far more scathing effect than these three examples cited above, since as a concluding sentence it remains without contextual correction, unlike these other ironic examples of xenophobia, which are always corrected by the argument that follows. Here, on the other hand, the final sentence approximates what Pierre Fontanier’s authoritative *Les figures du style* calls an “epanorthose,” ‘retroaction’ (408–9)—retroaction that will not be explained or corrected by the following sentence, because there is no such sentence. It is indeed up to Montaigne’s ideal reader, his “suffisant lecteur,” to understand and to correct.

It is not surprising, then, to find readers who did not understand this stylistic figure, as can be seen with one of Montaigne’s first English translators, Charles Cotton (1685), who links, in an unintentionally comical way, the sentence “they wear no Breeches” (Montaigne 1685, 386) with the information on the naked Indians given in the previous sentence: “when he [the Indian chief] went to visit the Village of his Dependance, they plain’d him Paths through the thick of their Woods, through which he might pass at his ease.” And Cotton continues: “All this does not sound very ill, and last was not amiss; for they wear no Breeches” (Montaigne 1685, 386). One notes that Montaigne’s first English translator, John Florio (1603), seems to be more sensitive to the figure of ironic retroaction, by translating (more) correctly: “All that is not very ill; but what of that? They weare no kinde of breeches or hosen” (Montaigne 1991, 107).

The ironic tenor of the concluding sentence is further underlined by two aspects that Montaigne scholars tend to underestimate or simply ignore: the ancient intertext of this