Montaigne's Paris
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The Paris that Montaigne knew was still emerging from the Middle Ages. The influence of religion and tradition was still very strong, and all power was in the hands of the King and the Pope. Yet with the discovery of the New World, an era of exploration began, not only of the map but also of the mind. The interactions of the Europeans with the so-called “savages” of the New World led to new examinations of society, culture, and beliefs. At the same time, a resurrection of classical philosophy opened new doors to intellectual and philosophical exploration. Michel de Montaigne was one of the most influential philosophers and writers of this period, and his “Essays” challenged French society and culture. He criticized the corruption that infected the aristocracy and the state as well as the religious intolerance that had led to numerous wars, the most serious being the Wars of Religion that ravaged France from 1562 to 1598. It was perhaps these wars that led Montaigne to question his society, especially in comparison to the new societies discovered in the Americas. In his essays, Montaigne suggests that although French society and most Europeans condemned the Native American societies as “savage” for their cannibalism, it was perhaps Parisian society and the monarchy that were truly barbaric, corrupted as they were by intolerance, inequality, and wanton violence.

In his essay “Of Cannibals,” Montaigne describes the society of the native peoples living in the Caribbean and compares them to Parisian society and the French lifestyle. He states that, due to their closeness to nature, their society is untainted by the corrosive influences that mar French society. In fact, Montaigne states he finds “nothing barbarous and savage in this nation…”
excepting, that every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own
country.” The savages, he asserts, are not brutal or uncivilized as the word suggests, but instead
“wild” in the same way forests are wild, meaning they are closer to nature. Consequently, their
society is closer to the purity and simplicity of nature, and farther from the corruption of the so-
called “civilized” states of Europe. Yet the French believe themselves to be more sophisticated,
civilized, and advanced than the savages, and it is this outlook that blinds the French to the
virtues of the society of the savages, and the vices of their own. Montaigne laments that the New
World was not discovered during a time “when there were men much more able to judge of
them.” He believed that those living in the Classical Era, such as Plato or Lycurgus, were more
“suitable” for understanding the true value of the savages’ society, because they were also closer
to the state of nature and were not corrupted by their society, as the French were.

Montaigne asserts that the corruption stems from two main sources, which are lacking
from the savages’ culture: an aristocracy and strong religious influences. He first criticizes the
aristocracy, condemning the superficiality and greed that led them to violence and immoral
action. He condescendingly calls them “fine people” who gloss over the truth and “never
represent things… simply as they are, but rather as they appeared to them, or as they would have
them appear.” In contrast, the poorer people, who were “simple and ignorant,” were more likely
to be truthful, suggesting that it was perhaps the example of the aristocracy that was leading the
French people astray.

The savages, likewise, are simpler, and they prize and practice the many virtues that the
French only claim to value. They prize “valor towards their enemies and love towards their
wives” as well as honesty; in fact, Montaigne states, they have no words for “lying, treachery,
dissimulation, avarice, envy” or even pardon because these concepts were foreign to them. Their
purity and simplicity have led to a society untouched by poverty, war, inequality, and the other faults that plague European society, and so it follows naturally that without the duplicity of the French aristocracy, the French people might also be better off.

Montaigne seems to feel that this corruption comes also from the influence of religion in French society. Among the savages, religion is kept strictly separated from the state. Their priests and prophets “very rarely present themselves before the people, having their abode in the mountains,” and consequently are not very involved in everyday life. Also, if their priests and prophets “do not make good the effect of their promise,” the savages punish them for their impudence in claiming to speak for God and for deluding the people. Therefore, according to Montaigne, the savages judge matters by their reason rather than by the word of a religious official.

He seems to be subtly implying that the French, by contrast, are much more dominated by the voices of others, especially the church, than by their own reason. In France, religion greatly influenced daily life, promoting the traditional social order and therefore the aristocracy. Through his descriptions of the savages’ perspective on religion, Montaigne suggests that the French should “judge by the eye of reason, and not by common report”; that is, they should use their reason to critique and analyze their environment. Ignoring reason and instead following others blindly, Montaigne implies, would invite corruption and violence. The savages have equality, an abundance of food, and few wars, and their lack of rigid social hierarchies and a strong religious influence seem to have contributed to this. Therefore, to avoid wars, corruption, poverty, and everything else that harassed France, Montaigne suggests would be necessary to establish a separation of church and state and encourage natural virtues as well as equality among all.
Montaigne lived in a Paris that had many problems but that was intolerant of criticism. His suggestion that the cannibalistic savages of the New World were more civilized than the French was no doubt radical, yet many of the issues he identified came to a head, violently, in the French Revolution almost two hundred years later. Throughout his essay, Montaigne suggests that the natural state of mankind is tolerance and a simple, sincere, and peaceful life. Although the savages that he describes were cannibals, he still held them as less violent than the Europeans; they at least waited until a person was dead before eating them, whereas the Europeans often tortured their enemies before killing them. Montaigne felt that to kill and torment “under the pretext of piety and religion,” as the Europeans did in the Wars of Religion was worse than cannibalism that the savages practiced. Yet the Europeans’ example was leading them astray, and Montaigne predicted that they would lose their simplicity and their trade with the Europeans would bring their ruin. However, if the French instead imitated the simplicity of the “savages” and learned to use their reason to evaluate their own actions, Europe could at last attain peace.
Works Cited