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Reviewed by: **Colin Ramsey**

Abstract

A book review of *Insatiable Appetites: Imperial Encounters With Cannibals In The North Atlantic World*, by Kelly L. Watson. Reviewed by Colin Ramsey (English Dept.) in *Early American Literature* (Winter 2018).

Ramsey C. *Insatiable Appetites: Imperial Encounters with Cannibals in the North Atlantic World*. *Early American Literature*. 2018;53(1):280. Publisher version of record available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/38063>

Book Review -- *Insatiable Appetites: Imperial Encounters with Cannibals in the North Atlantic World*, by Kelly L. Watson

Reviewed by: Colin Ramsey, Appalachian State University

In the more than three decades since Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America* (1982), scholars have regularly interrogated the myriad ways written discourse contributed to European imperialism in the Americas. Such discourses both developed and altered how "civilization" and "savagery" were defined, but always central to these definitions were alleged acts of cannibalism. Kelly Watson's colorfully titled book *Insatiable Appetites* is a significant contribution to this scholarship. It is a work of real comparative power, analyzing major chronological phases of European imperialism in North America in relation to specific regions. Watson also addresses a significant gap in studies of cannibalism discourse: the lack of attention to the ways such discourses were gendered. Indeed, Watson argues, "in the early modern period European understandings of cannibalism and savagery were more closely linked with gender and sexuality" than they were with race (3). Thus, Watson suggests, we need to understand how individual bodies were important sites of imperial domination, as much or more so than were land and natural resources, and to consider how conquest itself was cast as a gendered act.

Early in the introduction Watson notes that she will not attempt to answer anthropological questions about the actual historicity of cannibalism in the New World because it is essentially impossible to disentangle the surviving texts from their imperial contexts and literary antecedents. Moreover, she argues, what is most important is what Europeans thought about cannibalism based on what they read. The first chapter, "Inventing Cannibals: Classical and Medieval Traditions," is a relatively brief but important discussion of how ancient texts influenced European views of cannibalism. Christopher Columbus and his contemporaries "carried nearly two thousand years of discursive cannibal history with them" (23), and Watson thus examines an impressive array of ancient cannibal stories, including Greek Olympian myths, the histories of Herodotus, and work by Roman writers like Pliny the Elder.

Especially revealing is Watson's discussion of a letter from Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan, asking for advice about how to handle the obstinate and rumored-to-be-cannibal Christians in Bithynia-Pontus who had ignored his injunction against their strange ritual meals, and the glimpse of how fears of Christian cannibalism influenced ancient Roman law enforcement is fascinating in its own right. Throughout the chapter, Watson teases out common threads that run through this ancient literature, noting that the default status of human was virtually always gendered as male, and so any sexual behaviors that differed from what was seen as masculine also implied other "inhuman" practices, such as cannibalism. Watson notes that in many ancient texts, "the fear of cannibalism carried with it the fear of female desire and 'inappropriate' male desire" (36). In turn, such associations found their way into later medieval travel narratives, most especially works by Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville, and those texts display a continual interest in the supposed sexual promiscuity of Asian women, while connecting that sexuality with cannibalism. All these traditions meant that Columbus and his contemporaries quite simply expected to find sexually deviant and cannibalistic peoples when they traveled to faraway lands.

The next chapter, "Discovering Cannibals: Europeans, Caribs, and Arawaks in the Caribbean," is one of the book's best. Focusing on early contact Spanish texts, especially those by Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci, Watson argues that the Caribs tended to occupy the role of "bad Indians" in opposition to the Arawaks, who were depicted as "good Indians." Cannibalism played a key role in this opposition, with Columbus often reporting, if somewhat skeptically, that the Caribs practiced cannibalism and that Carib warriors also often traveled to an island inhabited only by women in order to engage in strange sexual practices. Such reports mimicked the ancient tradition, for instance, of the cannibalistic Scythians periodically being called to meet with Amazonian women to have sex. The pairing of cannibalism with "improper" feminine sexual desire and "deviant" male sex practices was expanded in the writings of Vespucci, who claimed the Caribs would castrate their enemies and then consume their genitals. This reflected one of the deepest fears of European men: their own virility could be removed and consumed by savages. Even as Columbus was skeptical of reports of cannibalism (as he also was about the Carib's supposed dog noses), by the time of Vespucci such claims were being repeated as fact. Ultimately, Watson argues, such descriptions made their way into the earliest visual depictions of the New World, where they were expanded again: the entirety of the North American continent was depicted as a nude woman, if one with potentially cannibalistic tendencies. Thus, in Vespucci's writing and in the images of "America" based on that writing, Watson argues that, "the encounter itself was an act of penetration." The Spanish were depicted as "purveyors of civilization," which they provided "through masculine dominance over the feminized figure of America" (85). Such images justified Spanish imperialism: America was being "saved"

from its primitive, cannibalistic, and feminine existence through the “civilizing” power of male sexual domination.

The third chapter, “Conquering Cannibals: Spaniards, Mayas, and Aztecs in Mexico,” deals with the linked tropes of cannibalism and sexuality as they were carried forward in the literature of the conquest of Mexico. Differences between the native societies of the Caribbean and the more urban societies of native Mexico initially challenged the application of those motifs. Watson notes that in Spanish eyes, “the peoples of Mexico . . . did not meet many of the characteristics of savagery,” and this “forced them to reevaluate and rearticulate their understandings of cannibalism” (90). Correspondingly, Spanish accounts of cannibalism in texts about the conquest placed even more emphasis on indigenous women being sexually aggressive and voracious, while the men were depicted as explicitly engaging in sodomy. By defeating native men on the battlefield, Spanish conquistadors thus saw themselves as reaffirming their own masculinity while they simultaneously emasculated their indigenous opponents, making them suitable for servitude. In the case of native women, sexual dominance was the typical “civilizing” approach, and it accomplished a similar reduction of their “unruly” and “unnatural” sexuality, which, again, made way for their incorporation into Spanish society, albeit, in servitude. In all, the domination of Mexico was thus justified in these accounts as being a moral obligation of the Spanish.

Chapter 4, “Converting Cannibals: Jesuits and Iroquois in New France,” is somewhat less fulsome, but it still holds considerable interest. Watson deftly outlines how the Jesuit order, beginning with its founder, Ignatius of Loyola, transformed the masculine virtues of a soldier—an ability to fight and cope with adversity—into a “masculine” piety of chaste moral virtue and an ability to suffer bodily pain. The Relations (1632), bodies of writing by Jesuits from New France, described the Jesuit missionaries as “soldiers for the spirit” who worked tirelessly to save indigenous souls. But here again, the trope of the “good Indian” and the cannibal “bad Indian” prevailed. In the Relations the converted Huron played the role of civilized “good” natives, and the powerful Iroquois were the savage “bad” Indians who tortured and consumed their enemies. While Iroquois culture and military power were such that the missionaries converted few Iroquois compared to Huron, Watson convincingly argues that “the ferocity of Iroquois attacks” along with the “possibility of martyrdom” nevertheless held a “strange enticement to the priests” (136). Suffering horribly painful executions at the hands of the Iroquois meant that missionaries had proved themselves to be especially worthy spiritual warriors.

The final two chapters are comparatively brief. Many readers of this journal may be somewhat disappointed by “Living with Cannibals: Englishmen and the Wilderness”: it is less detailed, and its analysis is somewhat less probing than earlier chapters, though

there are certainly some valuable discussions. One deals with texts about Jamestown by John Smith and others that describe the two episodes of endogenous cannibalism that apparently took place in Jamestown during the “starving time.” Watson notes that both the victims of the colonists’ starvation cannibalism were women, noting, “the various textual accounts and the forensic evidence” all “have in common . . . the consumption of a woman’s body,” and, thus, “their consumption reinforced [feminine] inferiority. For English men to consume other English men was nearly unthinkable” (162). Watson also deals with Indian captivity narratives in the chapter, arguing, for instance, that they were instrumental in developing the trope of the masculine American “frontier hero” while they also suggested that any indigenous people who opposed English domination of North America risked being called savage cannibals. Still, the connection between the motif of cannibalism in Indian captivity narratives with gender and sexuality is a bit murkier here than in the proceeding chapters.

Of course, no book can do everything, and, given the already considerable literature on Anglophone captivity narratives and gender, perhaps the subject requires less attention from Watson than the other bodies of imperial writing she analyzes. Indeed, the book as a whole is quite successful: it is highly persuasive that the motif of cannibalism contributed to the discourses of imperialism not simply as a way of defining “savagery” but also in specific ways that connected the “savage” with sex and gender, and these connections substantially reinforced European ideas about masculinity and patriarchy.

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