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## FROM THE UTOPIANS TO THE YAHOOOS: THOMAS MORE AND JONATHAN SWIFT

BY J. R. BRINK

Mr. Brink teaches at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona

IN writing *Gulliver's Travels* Jonathan Swift drew upon several literary traditions, ranging from popular eighteenth-century accounts of fantastic voyages to the classical Menippean satires. In addition, the influence of utopian works, such as Plato's *Republic*, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, and Sir Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* upon *Gulliver's Travels* is so pervasive that it has become a literary commonplace.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is possible to read Book III, "The Voyage to Laputa," as a parody of Bacon's *New Atlantis* and Book IV, "The Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," as an imitation and commentary upon Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia*.<sup>2</sup>

Comparison of the views of More and Swift on social reform and on dissent, however, points to an important shift in philosophical perspective. Reform is not possible unless men are assumed to be reasonable enough to perceive the need for change; nor can dissent be tolerated if human beings lack reason, the basis for choosing between truth and error. More's Utopians are not wholly rational beings; unlike the Houyhnhnms, they commit crimes and so need a criminal code, but their

<sup>1</sup> For the influence of Plato, More, and Bacon on Swift, see Jenny Mezciems, "The Unity of Swift's 'Voyage to Laputa': Structure as Meaning in Utopian Fiction," *Modern Language Review*, 72 (1977), 1-22; John F. Reichert, "Plato, Swift, and the Houyhnhnms," *Philological Quarterly*, 47 (1968), 179-92; and Malcolm M. Kelsall, "Iterum Houyhnhnm: Swift's Sextumvirate and the Horses," *Essays in Criticism*, 19 (1969), 34-45.

<sup>2</sup> See Mezciems, p. 6; see also John Traugott, "A Voyage to Nowhere with Thomas More and Jonathan Swift: *Utopia* and *The Voyage to the Houyhnhnms*," *Sewanee Review*, 69 (1961), 534-61.

rational institutions promote the well-being of their commonwealth. Swift's Houyhnhnms, on the other hand, do not know what lying is and need no laws, governed as they are wholly by reason. It is significant that the Houyhnhnms are not human; the Yahoos, not the Houyhnhnms, are the descendants of the Utopians. In spite of this suggestion that Swift took a more pessimistic view of human nature than that of More, in Book III More appears as a character in a group of ideal political statesmen, a classification worth examining because of the insight it affords regarding Swift's perception of More and of the Christian humanist tradition to which *Utopia* belongs.

When Gulliver arrives at Glubbdubdrib, an island peopled with sorcerers and magicians, he summons up the most virtuous political figures of ancient and modern history:

I had the honour to have much conversation with Brutus; and was told, that his ancestor Junius, Socrates, Epaminodas, Cato the younger, Sir Thomas More and himself were perpetually together: a *sextumvirate* to which all the ages cannot add a seventh.<sup>3</sup>

It is surprising to find More, a Catholic martyr, included in this list of political *sextumvirate* to which "all the ages of the world cannot add a seventh." Paradoxically, Swift metamorphoses the rational Utopians into horses and yet elevates More to the position of the ideal English politician.

In a study of More's influence on Swift, John Traugott poses a paradox related to the one examined here. Traugott asks why Swift hated Henry VIII, the first head of the Anglican Church, and admired More, a Catholic martyr. He resolves the paradox by suggesting that Swift respected More because they were both pessimistic about the ability of truth to prevail if dissent were tolerated:

It is precisely Swift's 'catholicism'—not latitudinarianism—in religion and politics, his contempt for nationalism, factionalism, and individualism, that informs the utopian passages of *Gulliver's Travels* and marks its philosophical debt to More.<sup>4</sup>

While Traugott is correct in saying that neither More nor Swift ap-

<sup>3</sup> *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, ed. Louis A. Landa (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 159. All further references will be cited in the text in parentheses. Kelsall, above, presents an ingenious argument that the types of rational virtue Swift selects for his *sextumvirate* demonstrate that he regarded the Houyhnhnms as an "ideal."

<sup>4</sup> Traugott, "A Voyage to Nowhere," p. 535.

proved of faction, More's solution in *Utopia* to the problem of dissent is very different from that of Swift. Because More does believe that truth will prevail as long as coercion is prohibited, he emphasizes the need for tolerance of rational dissent.

The passage which Traugott cites in support of his view that More would not have accepted "the liberal notion that truth will prevail" is one which has been variously interpreted by More's translators. In the more religiously conservative translation of 1551, Ralph Robinson confidently asserts that one religion is true:

Furthermore, though there is one religion which alone is true, and all others vain and superstitious, yet did he well foresee, that if the matter were handled with reason and sober modesty, the truth of its own power would at the last issue forth and come to light.<sup>5</sup>

Modern translators have favored the conditional for the first clause, rendering it, "He supposed that if one religion is really true and the rest false, that true one will prevail."<sup>6</sup> Yet comparison with the Latin text shows that Robinson is quite correct in emphasizing that as long as dissent is handled rationally, truth will triumph over error.<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting that King Utopus does not extend religious freedom to those who doubt the immortality of the soul or who believe that the universe is ruled by chance rather than divine providence. These men are not regarded as citizens, but, significantly, they are encouraged to debate with the priests and men of gravity—"hoping (or, "confident that") at last this madness will give place to reason" (p. 157).

More's conviction that man is capable of reason, that Truth will defeat Error as long as rational persuasion is allowed and coercion prohibited, is closer to the stance which Milton takes in *Areopagitica* than

<sup>5</sup> *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More including Roper's Life of More*, ed. Mildred Campbell (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand, 1947), p. 175. All further quotations from the *Utopia* will be taken from this edition of the 1551 translation by Ralph Robinson; references to *Roper's Life of More* will also be to this edition; page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> The Latin subjunctive requires a conditional rendering, but Robinson allowed his conviction that there was *one* true religion to color his translation.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Edward J. Surtz, S. J. and J. H. Hexter (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), 4, 220, esp. 11. 14-21: "tū si maxime una vera sit, caeterae omnes uanae. facile tamen praeuidit (modo cum ratione ac modestia res agatur) futurum denique: ut ipsa per se ueri uis emergat aliquando atque emineat." See, also, Traugott, "A Voyage to Nowhere," p. 552, where the important qualifier, "modo cum ratione ac modestia res agatur" or "provided the matter were handled reasonably and modestly," is omitted in his translation.

it is to Swift's intolerance of faction. More, in fact, makes rationality the key issue:

There are also others, and of them no small number, who are not forbidden to speak their opinion upon some reason, and in their living are neither evil nor vicious (p. 157).

The doctrine that animals have souls, for example, is tolerated. The principal purpose of the law which King Utopus passes is to prevent religious persecution and promote toleration. Again, significantly, it is a newly converted Christian who is condemned to exile because he turns into a zealot and praises Christianity above all other religions and calls those who follow other religions wicked and foolish, "the children of damnation" (p. 154).

The memory of the bitter civil war which divided England into political and religious factions was still very fresh when Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels*. He is intolerant of disagreement with the doctrines of the state church and impatient with political faction, so much so that he does not strongly differentiate between rational dissent and faction. When the generally enlightened King of Brobdingnag is skeptical about tolerating dissent, Swift seems to be expressing his own position:

He said, he knew no reason, why those who entertain opinions prejudicial to the public should be obliged to change, or should not be obliged to conceal them. And as it was tyranny in any government to require the first, so it was weakness not to enforce the second: for a man may be allowed to keep poisons in his closets, but not to vend them as cordials (p. 106).

Swift lacks More's confidence that man is capable of reason, a confidence that underlies the view that truth unfettered will emerge victorious over error.

To Jonathan Swift the perfectability of man seemed a tenuous idea indeed. The possibility of improving man by improving his social institutions, congenial as it was to become to nineteenth-century thinkers like Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, would not have appealed to Swift. Even so, Swift's critique of the Utopians goes beyond questioning the viability of establishing a rational commonwealth. In Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* Swift insists that if the Yahoos had some modicum of reason, as Gulliver's contemporaries presumably had, they would misuse and pervert it; man is more dangerous than a Yahoo, but he

is certainly not a Houyhnhnm. Reason, the quality that had ensured man a position in the Chain of Being above the animals, if below the angels, is susceptible to corruption and rarely functions as God's viceroy in man.

As a Christian, More, too, realized that man was liable to sin, but as a humanist, nurtured in a classical tradition of stoic virtue, he was able to maintain a more optimistic view of man's capacity for reason.<sup>8</sup> More, like Milton, belonged to the tradition of Christian humanism which insisted upon man's nobility while recognizing his vulnerability. Sir John Davies succinctly summarizes this view of man when he says:

I *know* I am one of *Natures* little kings,  
Yet to the least and vilest things am thrall.

. . .

And to conclude, I *know* my selfe a *Man*,  
Which is a *proud* and yet a *wretched* thing  
(*Nosce Teipsum*, 1599, II. 175-6; 179-80).<sup>9</sup>

Although the degree of More's sympathy with the views of Hythloday remains a matter of debate, there is a note of candor and sincerity in the final sentence in Book II:

. . . so must I needs confess and grant that there are many things  
in the Utopian commonwealth which in our cities I may rather wish  
than hope for (p. 175).

This is More the humanist acknowledging the doubts of More the Christian. Although by no means naively optimistic, More believed that man, guided by reason, is capable of reforming institutions and so promoting virtuous self-control. The *Utopia* is at once a criticism of the status quo in sixteenth-century Europe and an optimistic yearning for social reforms which might stimulate the cultivation of man's better nature.

If Swift took a more pessimistic view of human nature, why, then, did he single out More as the ideal English politician, the only Englishman worthy to be listed with classical representatives of virtuous statesmanship? There are several reasons: First and most important, More's

<sup>8</sup> For a judicious study of More's intentions in *Utopia*, see David M. Bevington, "The Dialogue in *Utopia*: Two Sides to the Question," *Studies in Philology*, 58 (1961), 496-509. See also Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Intellectual World of Sir Thomas More," *The American Scholar* (Winter, 1978-79), pp. 19-32 for an important reexamination of More.

<sup>9</sup> *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Krueger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 11. See also II. 1257-72, p. 46.

pragmatism appealed to Swift. Compared with the *Republic*, the *Utopia* is a highly practical work which considers economics, national defense, and regulation of trade and travel. Second, Swift agreed with much of More's social criticism. Although we sometimes pass over Book I of the *Utopia* very quickly, without its careful political and social analysis the second part of More's work might indeed seem a political fantasy. Third, to Swift More seemed an opponent of tyranny and of a tyranny which favored change. More's opposition to the high-handed religious innovation of Henry VIII is part of what earns him a place in Swift's *sextumvirate*.

Because More's pragmatism and his social criticism are interrelated, they can be considered together. In Book I of the *Utopia*, to illustrate the "proud, ridiculous, and obstinate prejudices" of kings and courtiers, Hythloday launches an attack on virtually every foundation of sixteenth-century European society: a farcical "justice" which provided for everyone but the poor, a lack of principle on the part of courtiers and kings, an economic system which allowed the rich to get richer while the poor became poorer. He also exposes how the values of "honor" and "glory" are used hypocritically to justify warfare and censures the "holy men" who hypocritically defend their own failures by citing scripture. Like More, Swift regarded his own society critically, and he seems to have arrived at many of the same conclusions regarding social ills.

Both men were skeptical about lawyers. More, who was himself a lawyer, has many misgivings about a legal system which binds men by laws too obscure to be understood and too many to be read. In *Utopia* every man is a legal expert because the laws are very few; in addition, every man pleads his own case so that there is less legal chicanery in the courts. Since cases are judged individually on equity, not on legal precedent, law commentaries are unknown. Swift likewise simplifies the legal system in Brobdingnag:

No law of the country must exceed in words the number of letters in their alphabet, which consists only of two and twenty. But indeed, few of them extend even to that length. They are expressed in the most plain and simple terms, wherein those people are not mercurial enough to discover above one interpretation. And to write a comment upon any law is a capital crime (p. 110).

The pragmatism which leads More to propose a less complicated legal system, a six-hour day with a split shift, and even an incubator to hatch

eggs and thereby increase the production of poultry undoubtedly recommended him to Swift.

Although Gulliver deplores the King of Brobdingnag's ignorance of the "art of government" and of the "science of politics," Swift clearly approved of his emphasis upon agriculture:

And he gave it for his opinion, that whoever could make two ears of corn, or two blades of grass to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of politicians put together (p. 109).

In the *Utopia* More requires all of the citizens to learn agriculture in addition to a trade or craft. In contrast, Plato's "guardians" in the *Republic* spend most of their time studying abstract mathematics and music. In *Gulliver's Travels* it is the Laputians, who study abstract mathematics and music and need flappers to awaken them during conversations. The Laputian obsession with mathematics may represent Swift's own ironic view of Plato's guardians as well as a satiric attack on Bacon's *New Atlantis*. Both More's emphasis on agriculture and his pragmatic approach to establishing an ideal commonwealth would have appealed to Swift, who fills the Grand Academy of Lagado with impractical "projectors."

Finally, although Swift despised religious and political factions, he even more bitterly opposed innovation. In this respect he is closer to Plato than to More. In the *Republic*, once the "ideal" system of education is developed, no change will be tolerated. In *The Sentiments of a Church of England Man with Respect to Religion and Government*, which Swift wrote in 1708, he quotes Plato in support of his own view that no person with a proper sense of responsibility will presume to attack the state church:

Plato lays it down as a maxim that *Men ought to worship the gods according to the laws of the country*; and he introduces Socrates in his last discourse utterly disavowing the crime laid to his charge of *teaching new divinities* or methods of worship.<sup>10</sup>

As Irene Samuels has observed, Swift's interpretation of the Socratic-Platonic position on religious innovation is open to question; however,

<sup>10</sup> *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939-68), 2, 11-12. Italics are Swift's and used to indicate quoted words.

Swift's own opposition to innovation and to attacks on the state church is self evident.<sup>11</sup> Historically, Henry VIII had weakened the church by robbing the monasteries; he was the innovator who had impoverished the church, not Sir Thomas More. Swift wholeheartedly supported what he perceived as the conservative religious and political stance of More.

Swift's respect for More as a politician may also have been influenced by the extant biographies of More. Although his son-in-law William Roper emphasizes that More is a Catholic martyr, he faithfully reports a number of conversations with More which suggest the political acumen of the latter. In his conversation with Sir Thomas Cromwell after being relieved of his office as Lord Chancellor, More is reported to have advised Cromwell:

in giving counsel to his Grace, ever tell him what he ought to do, but never tell him what he is able to do; so shall you show yourself a true faithful servant, and a right worthy Councilor. For if the lion knew his own strength, hard were it for any man to rule him (p. 247).

When Henry VIII declared himself the head of the Church of England, More's worst fears were realized. An independent church, free, if necessary, to engage in politics, provided the only check upon the absolute monarchy of the King, and More, willing even to accept the divorce, would not approve the removal of this last check on the King's power and authority.

Thus, it is intolerance of factions and pessimism about human rationality which underly the dystopian, not utopian, passages of *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift is closest to More's utopian perspective in his pragmatism and social criticism. Whatever differences separated the two men philosophically, More's opposition to political tyranny won Swift's admiration.

<sup>11</sup> Irene Samuel, "Swift's Reading of Plato," *Studies in Philology*, 73 (1976), 445.