

More's Literary Engagement with Colonial War in *Utopia* and its Aftermath¹

Sachiko Kuno

I

At the beginning of Book II of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), in the chapter on social relations, appears the following discussion of the conditions that might lead to a Utopian colonial war:

[I]f the population throughout the entire island exceeds the quota, they enroll citizens out of every city and plant a colony under their own laws on the mainland near them, wherever the natives have plenty of unoccupied and uncultivated land. The natives who want to live with the Utopians are adopted by them. When such a merger occurs, the two peoples gradually and easily blend together, sharing the same way of life and customs, much to the advantage of both. For by their policies the Utopians make the land yield an abundance for all, though previously it had seemed too poor and barren even to support the natives. But those refuse to live under their laws they drive out of the land they claim for themselves; and against those who resist them, they wage war. (135, 137)

In *More's Utopia* (1991), Dominic Baker-Smith discusses this passage and observes, "The entire proceeding has a painful similarity to the early settlement of the New World" (186), and then elaborates:

Columbus' *Letter* describing his 1493 voyage shows great sensitivity towards the American Indians but includes the ominous offer to send Ferdinand and Isabella slaves 'as many as they shall order', though — an important point — these will only be drawn from idolaters. More had certainly read the *Letter*. (199, No. 46)

The *Letter* was published more than 17 times between 1493 and 1497 and widely read in European countries. Baker-Smith is sure that More was aware of it, and also certain that when he wrote *Utopia* in 1516, More must have known about Columbus's 1492 landing and his behavior

towards the indigenous population in the New World. Given this awareness, can the colonial activity of More's Utopians be conflated with that of Columbus? In *Utopia*, three causes for just wars are enumerated in the chapter on military practices. Not only will the Utopians wage war (1) when an enemy has invaded and plundered one of their friends, but also (2) to avenge previous injuries. They are also (3) prepared to attack tyrannical states in order to free their people. Can we agree, along with Raphael Hythloday, to call the Utopians' colonial war their fourth just war?

II

When we compare the colonial activity of More's Utopians with that of Columbus, we easily recognize that there is a similarity between them, for both basically claim their righteousness by "the law of nature". Columbus mentions in his famous *Letter* that he first of all thanks God for safely guiding him to the New World. Then he reports his proclamation that the islands now belong to the Spanish kings. We have no record of what the natives felt about Columbus's landing and his proclamation of possession. It is quite possible that they simply did not have the means to wage war against Columbus, but this does not necessarily mean that Columbus could justify his usurpation by any natural law. Columbus also writes that he finds Espanola "fertile to a limitless degree" and that "the natives brought them all that they had in the world and knew that the Admiral wanted." As Stephen Greenblatt explains in *Marvelous Possessions* (1991), Columbus seems to have had no scruples about depriving the natives of their rich products and fertile lands with the implicit support of the law of nature for he considered the natives now, in a sense, included spiritually in the Spanish kingdom.²

As for the Utopians, there is the undeniable fact found at the beginning of Book II that King Utopus took land from the native people when he founded Utopia. Further, the move is justified as follows:

[I]t is perfectly justifiable to make war on people who leave their land idle and waste yet forbid the use and possession of it to others who, by the law of nature, ought to be supported from it. (137)

The Utopians, as agriculturalists, stake their claim on any "unoccupied and uncultivated" land which the natives have, confident that they can make the land yield an abundance for all. Thus, whether the natives want to live with the Utopians or not, or if they simply have no military means of resistance, the Utopian usurpation can be safely affirmed "by the law of nature". Yet, if

there were natives who refused to live under Utopian laws, then a war might start between them, but it would not be a just war because the Utopians should act according to the law of nations, not that of nature. The Utopians, however, pretend not to know the law of nations, and show a great misunderstanding of laws general. In this regard, George M. Logan, in a note to his new edition of *Utopia* (1995), makes the following point:

Since human equality was normally regarded as a fundamental precept of natural law, the doctrine that might makes right could be derived from it only by a perverse understanding. The "law of nations" signifies the body of legal principles common to different peoples: what is universally practiced, but not necessarily consonant with natural justice. (11)³

A "perverse understanding" of the "law of nature" enables the colonists to justify their usurpation. The "law of nature" is extremely harsh; might makes right is a natural law that can and is applied in relations between nations because military power can force acquiescence. The "law of nations" shouldn't be confused as 'natural', for the former is "not necessarily consonant with natural justice". Therefore, despite certain resemblances, they are not the same thing. Among nations, justice and ethics need be observed. In this section, however, More has the Utopians justify their usurpation only by "the law of nature".

III

What then is the dissimilarity between the colonial activity of the Utopians and that of Columbus? There are clearly differences between the Utopian case and that of Columbus. Columbus felt a certain self-justification in defending his colonial activity, as he thanked Christian God at the very beginning of his above-mentioned *Letter*. He had a definite and officially-approved religious motive. Greenblatt explains Columbus's motive as follows:

Columbus takes absolute possession on behalf of the Spanish crown in order to make an absolute gift: he seeks earthly gain in order to receive divine purpose; the Indians must lose everything in order to receive everything; the innocent natives will give away their gold for trash, but they will receive a treasure far more precious than gold; the wicked natives (the 'cannibals') will be enslaved in order to be freed from their own bestiality. (*Marvelous Possessions*, 70)

Columbus needed the New World's gold in order to strengthen Christianity in the Old World to

overcome the Islam. As Wai Chee Dimock points out in *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (2006): “1492 was not only the year when Columbus discovered America; it was also the year when Andalusia was lost to Islam, leaving a bitter aftertaste for centuries to come” (33). But, the Utopians have no religious motive when plundering the native’s land, for they are people whose state is a country of religious tolerance.

How then can we interpret More’s attitude toward Christianity in *Utopia*? In other words, how should we read the Utopian religious policies? Or, do they imply More’s own religious intentions? As a famous Christian humanist of his age, did he pay any attention to religious motivations regarding colonialism? As is well known, *Utopia* is a very complicated literary work and Morus in Book I and II is not More himself. In fact, More never shows the reader what he really thinks. More, Morus and Hythloday are internally connected, but never the same person. Concerning colonization including colonial war, we can only speculate about More’s real intentions, although we can read Hythloday’s explanations and Morus’s reaction against colonization and colonial war.

IV

In 1983, Elizabeth McCutcheon published her book, *My Dear Peter: The Ars Poetica and Hermeneutics for More’s Utopia*, and proposed the following reading of *Utopia*:

It would be both misguided and impossible to explain away the ambiguities, contradictions, and formal paradoxes of *Utopia*. We could, however, clarify some part of More’s intentions and illuminate the subtle workings of his consciousness if we had his own poetics and hermeneutics. The letter to Peter Giles ... is just such an *ars poetica*. (9)

The letter consists of three parts: the first part (lines 1–58), the second part (lines 59–85) and the final part (from line 86).⁴ In order to discuss the problem of colonization and colonial war, I would like to concentrate on the middle section, which deals with the missionary activity of the ‘devout man’. More seems to use many literary devices in this part.

At the beginning of this section, Morus explains why he does not know the location of Utopia:

[T]he difficulty can easily be cleared up if you’ll ask Raphael about it — either face-to-face or else by letter. And you must do this anyway, because of another problem that has cropped up - whether through my fault or yours, or Raphael’s. I’m not sure. For it didn’t occur to us to ask, not to him to say, in what part of the New World Utopia is to be found. (35)

We readers, however, cannot be easily persuaded that all three of them forgot to ask about or record such important information. In addition, in Giles' letter to Busleyden, he explains the servants interrupted Morus and his listening when Hythloday was speaking of Utopia's location. But, this explanation contradicts others suggested elsewhere, such as at the end of Book I of *Utopia*, when Morus says, "I ordered my servants to make sure that no one interrupted us. Peter Giles and I urged Raphael" (107) to talk. Also, in the first part of this letter, Morus obviously includes John Clement among the listeners (33) and, following the quotation above, mentions how much he would like to know the location:

I would give a sizeable sum of money to remedy this oversight, for I'm rather ashamed not to know the ocean where this island lies about which I've written so much. (35)

Morus says that he would like to offer "a sizable sum of money to remedy" the lack of information. To whom would he pay? To Hythloday? Maybe we had better read that this expression is rhetorical, like saying 'I would give the world to remedy this oversight'. It does not suggest or require that Morus know who has the information; it means he desires it enough he would pay someone who could tell him the location. In Book I of *Utopia*, Hythloday says that he needs no money to satisfy relatives and friends (51), not to mention himself. It seems to me that Morus's proposal referred to money in this letter suggests itself his ordinary ways of thinking, which implies Morus's inadequacy as a proper spokesman for Hythloday.

Morus further explains why he is so eager to acquire information on the location of Utopia:

[T]here are various people here, and one in particular, a devout man and a professor of theology, who very much wants to go to Utopia. His motive is not by any means idle curiosity, a hankering after new sights, but rather the desire to foster and further the growth of our religion, which has made such a happy start there. (lines 74-79)

It is true that the 'devout man and professor of theology' himself seems to completely misunderstand the Utopian attitudes towards religion in general. The Utopians would not accept the established Christian Church system.⁵ Is it possible to be holy and ambitious at the same time? Wanting to eradicate poverty or promote peace, for example, are ambitious projects but can certainly be ones that a holy person might fully — and ambitiously — engage in. But how and in what way does the 'devout man and professor of theology' know in this case that to evangelize Utopia is truly God's will? Does the above explanation explain all his motives? Morus continues

his explanation on “the devout man” as follows:

To do this properly, he has decided to arrange to be sent there by the pope, and even to be named bishop to the Utopians. He feels no particular scruples about applying for this post, for he considers it a holy ambition, arising not from motives of glory or gain, but from religious zeal. (lines 79 – 83)

More seems to be trying to discuss this question from another point of view. In Utopia, “holy ambition” should not exist for the Utopians who detest all ambition, and they are also a religiously tolerant people. Yet, the devout man in the letter asks for the title of bishop as well as the pope’s order to propagate Christianity among the Utopians. Neither the title nor the pope’s order will have any special meaning to the Utopians so it appears that the devout man has no understanding of the Utopians and Utopian society at all. However, what is most important in these descriptions, is that Morus appears not to realize this absurdity and isn’t this the same as proclaiming land lived on for thousands of years as suddenly the property of Spanish kings? Here I think More tries to describe Morus ironically as a person who is not so sensitive and sensible as More himself.

What kind of person is Morus then? In Book I, he introduces himself as a representative delegate of England, and an honorable citizen of London. He defines himself as a “renowned figure” and a politically important person:

[H]e (Henry VIII) sent me into Flanders as his spokesman to discuss and settle them.
I was the companion and associate to the incomparable man Cuthbert Tunstal....(41)

In this letter, we feel that More humanizes Morus and makes him more realistic. More makes Morus explain his busy life as the head of a household and a statesman at the beginning of the letter (lines 27-34). Baker-Smith explains this as Morus’s “domestic commitment” (82). Here we find more details about Morus than from his own description of himself. He is also the person who complains when he hears Hythloday’s detailed description of Utopia. As he says at the end of Book II:

When Raphael had finished his story, I was left thinking that not of a few of the laws and customs he had described as existing among the Utopians were really absurd. These included their methods of waging war, their religious practices, as well as other customs of

theirs. (247)

He explains why he is against the Utopian laws and customs:

[They] utterly overthrow all the nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty which are, in the estimation of common people, the true glories and ornaments of the commonwealth. (247)

The above quotation implies that Morus is an ordinary person who worries about the status and glories and ornaments of a secular world. Logan considers Morus thus:

The 'More' (Morus) closely resembles the author is clear. Yet it is equally clear that this cautious, practical lawyer and family man is More without his passion and vision, a More who could not have written *Utopia*, nor even have chosen martyrdom. (xxiv- xxv)

Baker-Smith also reads "a Chaucerian self-mockery"(82) in the description of Morus, and I think this portrait is one example of this. "(H)oly ambition" seems to suggest motivation similar to that of someone like Columbus. Baker-Smith points that Morus is "More's own mock-serious presentation of himself"(80) and observes:

Thomas More [...] ironically invents a theologian who had petitioned to be sent to Utopia as a bishop to further the conversion of the natives [...]. (220)

Although Morus describes here the devout theologian's ambition rather carelessly, More seems to be ironic towards the reader who does not realize Utopia is a country of religious tolerance that would resist missionary activities as unacceptable. But Morus doesn't seem to realize his carelessness.

Given the four points discussed above, I would like to suggest that More is clearly presenting his thoughts through irony that the Utopian colonial war is destined to be one of the flaws of even an ideal commonwealth like Utopia. Perhaps irony is at its greatest in the remark that Morus makes in his second letter to Giles when he observes that war might be a possible flaw "because he has noted some absurdities in the institutions of the Utopians" (267).

V

More's ideas have inspired other thinkers to explore the notion of colonization and colonial war discussed in *Utopia*. Here, I'd like to discuss More's *Utopia* in conjunction with some later considerations of these ideas by three eminent literary writers. The first is John Donne (1572–1631), whose 1622 promotional sermon to the Virginia Company raises some very interesting points for discussion.⁶ In this sermon, Donne tries to defend the morality of British colonization in establishing the Virginia plantation. He starts his discussion, by invoking an image of *terra nullius* to justify occupation and, further, its legality as follows:

In the Law of *Nature* and *Nations*, A Land never inhabited, by any, or utterly derelicted and immemorially abandoned by the former Inhabitants, becomes theirs that wil possesse it.... Againe if the Land be peopled, and cultivated by the people, and that Land produce in abundance such things, for want whereof their neighbours, or others (being not enemies) perish, the Law of *Nations* may justifie some force, in seeking, by permutaion of other commodities which they neede, to come to some of theirs. Many cases may be put, when not only *Commerce*, and *Trade*, but *Plantations* in lands, not formerly our owne, may be lawfull. (4: 274)

We cannot miss in the first sentence that Donne tries to analyze the difference between “the Law of *Nature* and Law of *Nations*”. By the Law of Nature, Donne, like the Utopian agriculturalist, tries to justify their behavior as necessary device. Donne affirms the colonist's activity in the Continent. But, following this section, Donne refers to the Law of Nations, and seems to use “may” (not affirmative) to affirm colonists' activity. Donne did make a clear difference between the law of Nature and the law of Nations. And I think this is one of the reasons that the passages below emphasize the need for the settlers to have a “rectified conscience”:

[Y]ou have *Commission*, your *Patents*, your *Charters*, your *Seals* from him, upon whose acts, any private Subject, in Civill matters, may safely rely... But... when the *Holy Ghost* is come upon you; that is, when the instinct, the influence, the motions of the *Holy Ghost* enables your Conscience to say, that your principall ende is not gaine, nor, glory, but to gaine Soules to the glory of GOD, ...your Conscience rectified, you shall have Power, a new power out of that; what to doe? that followes, to bee *witnesses unto Christ* (4: 274–5)

Donne is saying that usurpation is justified fully only when the settlers have a pure motive:

namely to propagate their Christian beliefs to the natives. I have no strong proof to insist that Donne may have in mind the justification of the Utopian colonization, and yet he is very conscious of the ambiguous position of the settler-usurpers. We had better remember the historical fact that how to affirm their selfish activities of colonization was one of the most urgent problems for the colonists of the Old World. Donne skillfully shifts responsibility to his congregation-settlers, probably to maintain his position as a dean of St. Paul's and to save his conscience as a human being at the same time.

The next voice I would like to consider is that of Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), and the implications of the last chapter of the Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* (1716). Gulliver, in concerning the lands he has found, says:

I confess, it was whispered to me, that I was bound in Duty as a Subject of *England*, to have given in a Memorial to a Secretary of State, at my first coming over; because, whatever Lands are discovered by a Subject, belong to the Crown. (274)

He explains the reason why he did not do so:

I doubt, whether our Conquests in the Countries I treat of, would be as easy as those of *Ferdinando Courtez* the naked *Americans*. (274)

He then adds:

A crew of Pyrates are driven by a storm they know not whither; at length a Boy discovers Land for the Top-mast; they go on Shore to rob and plunder; ...return home and get their Pardon. Here commences a new Dominion acquired with a Title by *Divine Right*.... But this Description, I confess, doth by no means affect *British Nation*, who may be an example of the whole World for their Wisdom, Care, and justice in planting colonies; their liberal Endowments for the Advance-ment of religion and learning; their choice of devout and able parsons to propagate *Christianity*...(275)

Although we are not sure whether Gulliver is mad or not, we cannot miss Swift's strong criticism of the Christian Imperialism of the "*British Nation*." As Carole Fabricant explains in her *Swift's Landscape* (1982) "Gulliver is used as a mouthpiece for exposing the nature of colonialist rule" (48), Gulliver seems to become the satirical spokesman for Swift himself in this chapter,

although, generally speaking, Swift tended to avoid going too deeply into religious matters.

I would also like to consider Samuel Butler (1835–1902), and focus on the conclusion of *Erewhon* (1872), the title of which is an anagram of nowhere. Higgs, the first person narrator of the novel unfolds a scheme for the conversion of Erewhonians in order to acquire the means to live after his return to England. He decides he will collect capital to charter a steamer, and, carrying two or three guns, return to Erewhon:

We should begin by representing the advantages afforded to labor in the colony of Queensland, point out to the Erewhonians that by emigrating thither, they would be able to amass, each and all of them, enormous fortune... It would be my duty and Arowhena's to see that our emigrants should be boarded and lodged in the household of religious sugar-growers...I will guarantee that I convert the Erewhonians not only into good Christians but into a source of considerable profit to the shareholders. (256–58)

We cannot forget that in *Erewhon* the Christianity of the Victorian period itself was utterly denied. As *Gulliver's Travels* and *Erewhon* are imaginary travelogues to utopian or dystopian countries, Swift and Butler indirectly or metaphorically express caution concerning the British Nations' colonization of newly discovered worlds. And, as British Imperialism was initially sponsored by the State and the Anglican Church at the beginning of the 17th century, both Swift and Butler worry about Christian as well as British Imperialism. Here we have to remember More's serious concern about the divisions or struggle within the Christian Church in Europe throughout his life, as is clearly shown in his last work, *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (1534). In it Anthony deplors deeply the conflicts between European Christian countries when the Turkish army is attacking Europe. It seems to me that this is likely one of the reasons why More includes religious tolerance as part of the Utopians' religious policies.

VI

While More's friend Erasmus appeals for peace in his *Querela Pacis, The complaint of Peace* (1517) and does not appear concerned about missionary works or colonization including colonial wars, More specifically refers to both topics in his first letter to Giles and Book II of *Utopia*. Though both More and Erasmus are devout Christians, the former seems more of a realist and the latter an idealist.

More left *Utopia* full of ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes, presenting it to the reader as

a topic for discussion, instead of a prescription for an ideal society. As Gary Saul Morson says in his *Boundaries of Genre* (1981), *Utopia* can be read as a meta-utopia, in which More discusses utopia as a genre. In other words, *Utopia* is a kind of superb magic box full of literary strategies. McCutcheon agrees with this definition:

Utopia aesthetically is like an enormous and many-levelled mobile: at every moment it is balanced but at every moment it rebalances; at once in motion and still, it dynamically creates new patterns before our eyes. (69)

We may well ignore Herman Oncken's claim to see the colonial politics of the Utopians as the first stirring of Anglo-Saxon Imperialism in 1923, primarily because British Imperialism has really started at the beginning of the 17th century as Christian Imperialism. As a modern historian David Armitage asserts:

More's work sets the limits to the possibility of planting overseas colonies, and appeals to the Roman model of *colonia* itself were rare before the 1620s. When used at all, the vernacular term 'colony' meant only the plantation of nucleated settlement within a foreign landscape, and carried none of the negative associations with the exploitation and cultural domination that are implied by the much later term 'colonialism'. (109)

It may be anachronistic to read *Utopia* as the Bible of British Imperialism. As I indicated before, More let the Utopians make affirm their usurpation by the law of nature, not by the law of nations. The Utopian affirmation of their usurpation is illogical. More knows that the colonization may be admitted by the law of nature, but it does not necessary mean that it is admitted by the law of nations.

More also made a kind of compromise by constructing his Utopia as a country of religious tolerance. His literary engagement with the issue of colonization, and religious tolerance in Utopia as his solution, reflects his problematic positioning as both a statesman and a Christian humanist. As Baker-Smith suggests, after indicating the dualism represented by Morus and Hythloday in *Utopia*:

Such a tantalizing juxtaposition of prophetic intensity and practical compromise is conventional enough in the tradition of the dialogue, ... since both of these tend to thrust the interpretive responsibility on to the reader. (217)

Generally speaking, from the old days of Lucian, the genre of “dialogue” has been used as one of the literary techniques that allows a writer to present two views of a topic. More uses the dialogue as one of his techniques to show his own equivocal positions in terms of what constitutes an ideal society. More also uses several other narrative techniques by setting Morus as one of the characters in *Utopia*; and by adding letters attached to *Utopia* itself, he tries to show his *ars poetica*, that is, his literary techniques. More is not Morus. This is one of the reasons why he let Morus mention the devout theologian’s “holy ambition” without hesitation. More does not want to be involved in the intricate problems of contemporary religious wars in Europe, and yet he wants to refer to religious problems. As a statesman and a Christian humanist at the same time, he shifts the interpretive responsibility onto the reader of his *Utopia*, while Donne, as an Anglican priest, shifts his to the congregation-settlers in his Virginia Sermon. But, who can blame either? The problems concerning colonization including colonial war have been perennial ones since the days of Plato and continue to trouble us today.

Notes

- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Thomas More Conference in Amherst, Massachusetts, on 13 August 2007.
- ² Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 52–85.
- ³ As is indicated by Logan’s footnote (11), there had been a discussion on the difference between the law of nature and the law of nations in Roman periods. See in R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West*, 6vols, I, especially 33–44.
- ⁴ McCutcheon divides this letter into three parts in *My Dear Peter*.
- ⁵ Greenblatt misreads the Utopian’s religion or religious attitude, for he explains as follows:

The Utopian attitude is More’s Cockayne-like fantasy of a people for whom Conversion to the truth faith would be no trauma, a fantasy akin to that indulged in by Christopher Columbus on 12 October 1492. No wonder that we are told of a prelate who burned with the desire to be named apostle to the Utopians: they would be a blissfully easy assignment.” ... you would not believe how readily disposed they, too, were to join it, whether through the rather mysterious inspiration of God or because they thought it nearest to the belief which has the widest prevalence among them”. There is no question of Christianity being absorbed by the Utopians cult of Mithras; rather the Utopians will in time join the fellowship of the Catholic faithful. (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 64)

- ⁶ See my paper: “John Donne and the Rhetoric of Christian Imperialism: Reconsidering the Virginia Sermon”. *Jyuhitiseikieibungakukenyu*, vol. 12, 2004, pp. 204–189.

Works Cited

- More, Thomas. *Utopia, Latin Text & English Translation*, edited by George M. Logan, Robert Adams & Clarence H. Miller, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
-
- Armitage, David. "Literature and Empire" *The Origin of Empire*, ed. Nicholas Canny. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 99–123.
- Baker-Smith, Dominic. *More's Utopia*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.
- Butler, Samuel. *Erewhon*, London: Penguin Classics, 1970.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Donne, John. *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10 vols. eds. George R. Potter & Evelyn M. Simpson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62. vol. 4.
- Fabricant, Carole. *Swift's Landscape*, 1982; rpt. University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions, The Wonder of the New World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- _____. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- McCutcheon, Elizabeth. *My Dear Peter: The Ars Poetica and Hermeneutics for More's Utopia*, Angers, 1983.
- Morson, Gary Saul. *The Boundaries of Genre*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1981.
- Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*, Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1986.