

## Humour in More's *Utopia* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

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### Abstract

Thomas More's *Utopia* influenced Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* greatly. The closeness of the two books is indicated by, for example, Turner's notes for his edition of *Gulliver's Travels*. But the two books differ much in form and type of narrative. *Utopia* might be insipid for indifferent readers who are not so accustomed to such discourse. *Gulliver's Travels* is interesting for any readers because of various methods of satire in the narrative. The difference is indicated, for example, in the accounts of military affairs. To understand these books, it is important to see beyond differences and to reconsider the common spirit of criticism of human society and how humour disguises severe criticism of human nature.

The names of the two fictional characters Hythloday and Gulliver share the spirit of humour that is common in the two books. Thomas More, indicating that his sense of humour is intelligible only to the learned reader, invents the character Hythloday, "expert of nonsense." More jokingly denies that the book is a fiction and insists on its veracity in his second letter to Giles. More mentions proper nouns such as Anydrus and Utopia, obvious coinages of More's, as proofs of the reality in the narrative. Similarly, Jonathan Swift invents Gulliver, the character and supposed author of the *Travels*. Gulliver, "Splendide Mendax" (magnificent liar), is not only 'gullible' himself, but also may deceive the reader. Since both More and Swift appear to be the 'doubles' of the characters Hythloday and Gulliver, readers cannot decide which is lying, More or Hythloday, Swift or Gulliver.

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## I

In the 1960's, Brian Vickers writes that the connection between Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* with Thomas More's *Utopia* is "surprisingly neglected" (19). Although the neglect does not seem to have changed greatly since then, *Utopia* was a great precedent of *Gulliver's Travels* because Swift regarded More as "the only man of true virtue that ever England produced" (*Prose*, V 247). *Utopia* was "a source to which Swift went repeatedly" when writing *Gulliver's Travels* (Elliott 50). Sources of *Gulliver's Travels* are many and varied, ranging from Lucian's fictional *True Story* to Dampier's non-fictional *New Voyage Round the World*. *Utopia* has been regarded as one of the greatest influences on *Gulliver's Travels*.

However, *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* differ greatly on the surface. But there exists a common spirit in the two books, because both More and Swift create the fictional characters Hythloday and Gulliver. Hythloday narrates his story of "the New Island of Utopia" and Gulliver writes his story of "Several Remote Nations of the World." The very names 'Hythloday' and 'Gulliver' indicate subtle relationship between reality and fiction, drawing attention toward playfulness and humour in both books that severely satirize human society.

This paper discusses elements of fiction and humour common to both works. These two elements are vitally important when we consider the connection of the two masterpieces and the consciousness of the authors, More and Swift, concerning the readers of the two books.

## II

Paul Turner's notes to *Gulliver's Travels* contain many references to More's *Utopia*, indicating the closeness of the two books. For example, both books address people who want to read about strange, supernatural creatures. Both books are sarcastic about alliances and colonization of European nations. And both books close focusing on 'pride.' In *Utopia*, 'pride' is called "one single monster, the chief and progenitor of all plagues, . . . too deeply fixed in men to be easily plucked out" (243-45).<sup>1</sup> In the last page of *Gulliver's Travels*, 'pride' is

1 References to *Utopia* are to vol. 4 of *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, eds. Edward Surts, S. J. and J. H. Hexter, and will be given in the text.

mentioned as most disgusting:

But, when I [Gulliver] behold a Lump of Deformity, and Deseases both in Body and Mind, smitten with *Pride*, it immediately breaks all the Measures of my Patience; neither shall I be ever able to comprehend how such an Animal and such a Vice could tally together. (296; pt. 4, ch. 12) <sup>2</sup>

These instances are found in only the twelfth chapter of "The Voyage to the Houyhnhnms." Turner sees forty-seven specific connections between the two books, and most of the indications by Turner are plausible. However, *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* differ in important ways.

The structure of *Utopia* is rather complicated. The two parts of *Utopia* differ in terms of length and narrative. The first, shorter part of *Utopia* records the dialogue between Hythloday and 'More.' The second, longer part transcribes Hythloday's discourse about the social system of Utopia. Parts 1 and 2, written by 'More,' are the main sections of the book. Many commentaries are added to the body of the text. The commentaries are supposedly by Peter Giles, who listens to the dialogue and the discourse and edited the book (or Erasmus, who also took care of publication). Preceding and following the text are map of Utopia, poems and letters showing the circumstances surrounding the creation and reception of the book.<sup>3</sup> The whole setting of *Utopia* is rather complicated, too. Hythloday's story is not communicated directly to the reader, because 'More,' as listener and writer, intermediates between Hythloday and the reader. *Utopia* is 'written' not by Hythloday but by 'More,' remembering the 'actual' words of Hythloday.

*Gulliver's Travels* has simpler structure than *Utopia* partly because it imitates the simpler literary genre of travel literature. *Gulliver's Travels* has four parts of about same length and written in similar style, although each part has its own characteristics. There are four maps for each voyage and only three articles: "Advertisement," "A Letter from Capt. Gulliver to his Cousin Sympson," and

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2 References to *Gulliver's Travels* are to *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis et. al., 14 vols., XI, and will be given in the text.

3 Numbers and order of them in each edition are different.

“The Publisher to the Reader.”<sup>4</sup> According to the whole setting of *Gulliver's Travels*, after the return to England, Gulliver writes his own experiences in the various countries. In other words, ‘the character Gulliver’ experiences various things, and ‘the writer Gulliver’ communicates them to the reader. We may regard simply that the book is ‘written’ by Gulliver himself without an intermediater like ‘More.’

Social conditions and the way they are described differ greatly in the two books. In the first part of *Utopia*, ‘More’ reports the discussion about whether or not philosophers should serve monarchs. In the second part, the social system of Utopia is described as an ideal communist society without private property. ‘More’ reports that Hythloday regards private property as the cause of all evil in European civilization. The various subject matters illustrated include cities, people, grounds, rivers, manners, religion, laws, education, travel, etc., subjects suitable for a treatise of social science. In fact, subjects treated in the second part of *Utopia* are characteristic of books now classified as Utopian literature, named after More’s imaginary island. *Utopia* tends to be dull and insipid for indifferent readers not accustomed to such a treatise.

*Gulliver's Travels* may be more interesting than *Utopia* because Gulliver deals with the social situation of each country and also communicates Gulliver’s personal experience. Rather such sections as the sixth chapter of “The Voyage to Lilliput” that introduces the various situations of the Lilliputian society appear to be mere insertions into the story of Gulliver’s experiences. Besides, *Gulliver's Travels* has a variety of the methods of satire on the same problems treated in *Utopia*.

One instance of satirical skills is found in the discussion of military affairs. In “The Voyage to Lilliput,” episodic accounts of the protagonist’s experience and behavior are remarkably interesting. “The Voyage to Lilliput” opens with the Lilliputian army shooting arrows at the supine and bound Gulliver. In the third chapter, Gulliver tells about military discipline of the emperor’s army on the handkerchief and the marching under Gulliver standing like a Colossus. The climax of this voyage is Gulliver’s seizure of the whole fleet of the Blefusudian navy. In “Lilliput” most of the military activities are satirized as being small and worthless.

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4 The first edition has only one article, “The publisher to the Reader.”

In "The Voyage to Brobdingnag" the satire on war is more bitter than in "Lilliput." Gulliver tells the king enthusiastically about European warfare technology and the power of gunpowder in particular, and recommends him to produce it. The king frowns and declares that, "he would rather lose Half his Kingdom than be privy to such a Secret." Remembering the king's reject Gulliver writes, "A strange Effect of *narrow Principles* and *short views!*" (135; pt. 2, ch. 7). Gulliver is a completely different man than when he was in the court of Lilliput, where he did not support the Emperor's ambition to conquer Blefuscu.

Evil aspects of military action are simplified and exaggerated in the last part of *Gulliver's Travels*. War is shown to be one of the most contemptible of human activities, especially when Gulliver reports to his Houyhnhnm master:

For these Reasons, the Trade of a *Soldier* is held the most honourable of all others : Because a *Soldier* is a *Yahoo* hired to kill in cold Blood as many of his own Species, who have never offended him, as possibly he can. (246-47; pt. 4, ch. 5)

Gulliver's discourse is a pure satire, but the unity of the character Gulliver is sometimes sacrificed for the sake of satire. In some cases, Gulliver is more a satirical device than a character in a novel. In *Gulliver's Travels*, problem of war is treated satirically with various methods and techniques.

In *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* we are reminded of the horror and futility of war (Vickers 242). But a clear distinction can be made between Hythloday's discourse and Gulliver's story. In the second part of *Utopia*, Hythloday tells about the superiority of weapons, organization, and fearful strategy of the Utopian army. The Utopian army's "habit of bidding for and purchasing an enemy" is praised (205), but it is impossible to decide whether or not the Utopians are really honorable. They even seem more evil than the Yahoo soldiers in *Gulliver's Travels*, for they use "fearsome, rough, and wild" Zapoletants in war and care not in the least how many are lost. Utopians think that "they would be the greatest benefactors to the human race if they could relieve the world of all the dregs of this abominable and impious people" (207-9).

## III

To assert that *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* belong to the same genre of literature, satire, it is necessary to grasp the fundamental spirit that connects these two seemingly different books. It is useful to reconsider the common satiric spirit of both books, because to point out differences or similarities is often a superficial way of argument. As satire, *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* have two common elements. One element is severe criticism of the real world. Another element is humour directed at human nature and human behavior. The severe criticism is based on the severe view of humanity of More and Swift. If not for criticism of the irrationality of human society, and the serious need for more rational and ideal condition, both books would have been completely different, undeserving much attention by modern readers.

The attitude of criticism, however, sometimes results in only an attack against the reality and presentation of one's selfish program of the reformation of the society. An author who wants too much to impose his fantasy on others usually invites antipathy and repulsion instead of sympathy and support. However, when criticism is accompanied by humour, the work might be easier to digest through the effect of joke and playfulness. Besides, the work might be considered higher and more valuable. Depending on the situation, the tone of *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* is sometimes critical and sometimes humorous.

## IV

The names 'Hythloday' in *Utopia* and 'Gulliver' in *Gulliver's Travels* draw attention to the essential element of humour in both books. In the original Latin text of *Utopia*, Hythloday is Raphael Hythlodæus. 'Raphael' links him with the sociable archangel. 'Hythlodæus' is from 'hythlos' (nonsense) and 'daiein' (to distribute). The name may mean "God heals [Heb., *Raphael*] through the nonsense [Gr., *huthlos*] of God [Lat., *dei*]" (Adams 6, n.). Or the name may mean simply "nonsense peddler" or "expert in nonsense" (Logan 35, n.).

In *Utopia*, Thomas More intentionally names the main character Hithloday. More makes Hythloday talk about Utopia. More has Hythloday talk with his character 'More.' And 'More' reports the account. The impression of most

readers might be that *Utopia* describes some 'ideal' society. But when readers argue whether a certain passage is serious or a sly joke, they can never be certain (Traugott 149). In any case, most of the opinions expressed by Hythloday are probably the author More's own simply because *Utopia* is written by More. But the reporter 'More' maintains a point of view differently from Hythloday. 'More' writes, "I cannot agree with all that he [Hythloday] said" (245). It is always possible that the feelings expressed by 'More' differ from More's true feelings.

More avoids attack from religious and political authorities who would dislike the peculiar social system that abolishes personal property, allows suicide, and criticises European monarchy. More disguises his true voice by speaking through the words of a character who is supposedly a mere reporter of the statement made by a traveller. However eccentric and problematic the narrative might be, the content is not necessarily More's own opinion, nor is he responsible, because what is narrated is only 'nonsense.' Today, it is natural to distinguish the author More and the character 'More' and Hythloday. But some readers might confuse these three. More must have been aware that this confusion might occur.<sup>5</sup>

More distances himself from direct responsibility for the words in his book by denying that the book is fictional. He insists that Hythloday really exists and also the island of Utopia really exists somewhere on the earth. But those readers who can recognize the fictive strategy of the book can find that More's insistence is a mere surface gesture and transparent falsehood. More's insistence that the story of Utopia should be believed actually increases disbelief. More's serious attitude about the veracity of *Utopia* gets closer to jesting.

In the second letter of More to Giles in the Paris edition of 1517, More discusses the subtle relationship between fact and fiction. More answers a reader's question about whether this book is fact or fiction. More writes:

I do not pretend that if I had determined to write about the commonwealth and had remembered such a story as I have recounted, I should have perhaps shrunk from a fiction whereby the truth, as if smeared with honey, might a

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5 Another possibility is that, as R. M. Adams points out (125), he wanted to retain some ironic reservations, for Busleiden and Bude had been too emphatic in endorsing the idea of community property.

little more pleasantly slide into men's minds. (251)

Although this statement is rather complex, the meaning is clear. More says that if the accounts in *Utopia* are not real but fictitious, he would have spread a little fiction, but he did not spread fiction, because *Utopia* is a true story. Careful readers understand that More's words are a sort of a false syllogism: I write my fabrication in the form of fiction; I did not write my book in the form of fiction; so my book is not a fabrication but an account of a true story. But the veracity is not certified by the logic in his syllogism at all because he could write a fictional book composed as if it were a true story.

More also admits that if he wanted to apply the form of fiction, he should have let the learned readers know More's own purpose by the proper nouns that may serve as an explanation. More writes:

I should certainly have tempered the fiction so that, if I wanted to abuse the ignorance of common folk, I should have prefixed some indications at least for the more learned to see through our purpose. (251)

Then, More mentions such proper names of places and peoples in the book as Utopia, Anydrus, Amaurotum, and Ademus. Most of the proper nouns in the book are made from Greek and the meaning of the names is all too clear. It is obvious that More invented them. More's explanation about the names is clever. He continues his letter as follows:

[I]f I had done nothing else than impose names on ruler, river, city, and island such as might suggest to *the more learned* that the island was nowhere, the city a phantom, the river without water, and the ruler without people, it would not have been hard to do and would have been much wittier than what I actually did. Unless the faithfulness of an historian had been binding on me, I am not so stupid as to have preferred to use those *barbarous and meaningless* names, Utopia, Anydrus, Amaurotum, and Ademus. (251, italics mine)

For More, the words Utopia, Anydrus, Amaurotum, and Ademus are "barbarous



and meaningless" because he didn't invent such names. Instead, he insists that he wrote the 'real' names according to Hythloday's words. However, "Anydrus" precisely means a river without water, "Utopia" means nowhere, "Amaurotum" means a city of phantom, and "Ademus" means a ruler without people. It must be distinct for "the more learned" that these proper names are the very explanation of More's intention. The remarks concerning proper nouns invented by More make clear that not only this part of the letter but also *Utopia* itself is a sophisticated joke.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that More's joke is directed to "learned readers" like Giles not to the ignorant, "common folk." Presumably, More intended to deceive ordinary readers through complicated and rhetorical statements about the proper names. Although it may be hard to believe, naive readers might have thought More's story true. "[A] certain dolt" mentioned in the letter from Rhenanus to Pirckheimer insists that "no more thanks were due to More" because "all More said was taken from the mouth of Hythlodæus and merely written down by More" (253). In More's second letter to Giles is an intellectual conspiracy among those who can fully understand the whole structure and meaning of *Utopia*.

*Utopia* was originally written in Latin for the European intellectual class, the limited readership of the sixteenth century. Undeniably, on a certain level, More wants those intellectual readers who can understand his intention to regard his book as a highly sophisticated joke. More hopes readers contrast contemporary European society with the Utopian society. As Father Surtz observes, "The hell in More's masterpiece is western Christendom; the paradise is Utopia" (cxxxviii). More expressed his thoughts variously toward those intellectual elites. Naturally, the complicated form of *Utopia* and its indirect narrative relate to More's hopes that *Utopia* should be read by the learned readers as a serious joke. More's intention is symbolized in the paradoxical name of Hythloday, "expert in nonsense."

In the original Latin text of *Utopia*, 'More' is represented as 'Morus.' 'Morus' can connect itself to moria, Greek for folly. The persona 'More' does not share Hythloday's enthusiastic praise of Utopian social system as we have seen before. But those readers who simply regard *Utopia* written by Thomas More without

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6 In addition, these words seem to be More's pretext for his coinage of the proper nouns of which meaning is too obvious for them.

paying attention to the structure of *Utopia* might not appreciate More's careful and meaningful discrimination between More, and 'More' ('Morus') and Hythloday. In any case, if we take More, 'More' and Hythloday to be identical, or if we regard Hythloday and 'More' as the 'doubles' of More himself, we may assume that the entire text of *Utopia* is More's serious narration through the mouths of the two jokers, Hythloday and 'More.'<sup>7</sup>

## V

Until R. W. Chambers's biography of More in 1935, *Utopia* had been criticized by some Catholics because of its many non-Christian features. Some regarded *Utopia* as a mere joke being unimportant part in More's career. On the other hand, socialists like Karl Kautsky regarded *Utopia* as a very serious book representing socialism for the first time. We may say that *Utopia* is a serious joke and comical elements deserve emphasis in particular, because *Utopia* has kinship to *Praise of Folly* written by Erasmus, who played a considerable role in the writing and the publication of *Utopia*.

To interpret *Gulliver's Travels*, it is important to focus on comic elements. *Gulliver's Travels* is not a product of hate and insanity of Swift, even though he lost his mind and hated mankind in his later years. It is more appropriate to underline the fact that *Gulliver's Travels* was written nearly the same time Swift was struggling for the rights of the Irish people as the author of *Drapier's Letters*. We may regard *Gulliver's Travels* as being full of spirit and energy of a healthy mind.

Spirit of humour and playfulness can also be found in the name Lemuel Gulliver, supposed writer and protagonist of *Gulliver's Travels*. "Lemuel" means "belonging to God" or "devoted to God," but the meaning should be taken ironically (Turner 307). "Gulliver" suggests gullibility, and from the name the reader can anticipate Gulliver's fate. Gulliver worships the Houyhnhnms as if they were Gods. After coming back to England, Gulliver hates his wife and children and spends hours conversing with his horses.

The playfulness with fiction and falsehood reminds of the words "Splendide

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7 See Erskine-Hill 14.

Mendax" (a magnificent liar) beneath Gulliver's portrait in the 1735 Faulkner edition. *Gulliver's Travels* has many devices to blur reality and fabrication. Apparently, Swift wants *Gulliver's Travels* to be seen as a realistic account of Gulliver's four voyages. Swift repeatedly tries to show that his work is non-fiction. Swift has Gulliver write, "Thus, gentle Reader, I have given thee a faithful History of my Travels for Sixteen Years, and above Seven Months; wherein I have not been so studious of Ornament as of Truth" (291; pt. 4, ch.12). But the more Gulliver insists on its veracity, the more his narrative becomes unreliable.

*Gulliver's Travels* is obviously a fiction rather than a true story. Even a little child does not believe there possibly exists a country of little men whose height is only six inches or a country of big men of twenty-four yards. Even the reader who cannot understand the Latin words, "Splendide Mendax," can understand that *Gulliver's Travels* is clearly a fiction. Swift's sense of humour is obvious when he insists on the reality of *Gulliver's Travels* that is a plain fiction. The name Gulliver signifies not only that Gulliver is gullible but also he can deceive the reader. The words "Splendide Mendax" appearing before the text inform the reader that *Gulliver's Travels* is a lie.

The 1735 edition of *Gulliver's Travels* has a more remarkable feature concerning the fictional author Gulliver. The title reads "Volume III of the Author's Works containing Travels into Several Remote Nations... by Lemuel Gulliver." This title indicates the difference between Swift, the author of the "Works" and Gulliver, the writer of the "Travels." The title suggests explicitly that Swift invented both *Gulliver's Travels* and Gulliver.<sup>8</sup> Today, "Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift" is a common idea of general readers showing that Swift invented both *Gulliver's Travels* and Gulliver. However, in the first edition in 1726, Swift never writes his name as the author but he makes the book as if written by Gulliver. Less than ten years after the publication of the first edition, Gulliver came to be regarded not as the 'real' but as the 'fictional' author.

There is a more important point to note. Falkner's edition of Swift's works consists of four volumes. At the beginning of volume 1 is Swift's portrait. And in volume 3, *Gulliver's Travels*, is Gulliver's portrait. The pose of Swift and Gulliver are almost the same and the layout of the two portraits are almost the same,

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8 See Rodino.

too. Though the facial expressions are not similar, other appearances are almost identical.<sup>9</sup> To look at the two portraits side by side encourages the idea that Swift and Gulliver are 'doubles.' When we distinguish the 'true' author from the 'fictional' author, Swift is not Gulliver. However, it is possible that some readers simply think that Gulliver is Swift's 'double.' So, if we think Swift and Gulliver are identical, not only Gulliver but also Swift is "Splendide Mendax."

### Conclusion

*Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* are based on humour. Both More and Swift created the characters Hythloday and Gulliver to suggest the fictitiousness of the books. It may be concluded that, both in *Utopia* and in *Gulliver's Travels*, fiction is closely connected with humour and playfulness through the act of lying. It is impossible to decide who is lying, Hythloday or More, Gulliver or Swift, because in both books character and author seem to be 'doubles.' One of the necessary conditions for the reader to enjoy such books as *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* is to be able to feel pleasure at being deceived and bewildered by the narrative.

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9 See Rodino 1058-59 for the photocopy of the two frontispieces and the title page lay-out as well.

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