DYSTOPIAN FEMALE IMAGES IN MORE'S *UTOPIA*

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Thomas More's famous work *Utopia* has justly been the object of a voluminous amount of scholarly work insofar it started an original fashion of literary and cultural form. In spite of the distinct interpretations, which have come to light throughout the years, the wish to present a bettered world in exercise stands out as a major goal of his work. The dream to convert his England into a more productive society using the current knowledge and manufacturing processes, and in so doing, to construct a more egalitarian commonwealth highlight as tangible objectives for More's progressive project.

However, in terms of gender, *Utopia*'s harmonic world vision is denied, the humanist view that prevails in his dream world being a patriarchal one. There, men are granted better chances of living according to their own merits and efforts, both as individuals and citizens, their roles in the public sphere no longer depending on chancy birth rights and privilege. Notwithstanding this new political structure, women seem to linger on men's shadow, deprived of an autonomous contribution in public affairs. They remain males' subordinated, their traditional functions and duties keeping them off from growing into adult and complete human beings some women were about to claim.

Thus, in our contemporary view, the discrepancy between male and female spheres in More's proposal, inasmuch as it produces a draw back effect in a commonwealth to-be, may introduce a dystopian element in his eutopia, which contradicts the pursuit of happiness purpose for everyone.

Thomas More's famous work *Utopia* has justly been the object of a voluminous amount of scholarly work insofar as it started an original fashion of literary and cultural trend. His description of "the best state of a commonwealth," as he called it, stems, however, from a rather long tradition belonging to different literary genres having in common the longing for a fairer and more hospitable world.

From the architectural projects of Paellas of Chalcedony and Hippodamus of Millet, from the fifth century B.C., whose urban planning derived from their notions of social and productive organisation, to Plato's *Republic,* the idea of improvement in man's living conditions was already present. Nonetheless, these do not actually constitute proper utopian works inasmuch as they do not describe active communities, but only inert, theoretical models to be

implemented by those in positions of power. As far as Plato is concerned, there are fantasised reports on the mythical Atlantis both in *Timaeus* and *Critias*, which somehow corresponds to this notion of an ideal working community (Ruyer 1950: 137). Moreover, these dialogues also contain a fictionalised discourse, using what may be called a reliable narrator, namely an Egyptian priest and Critias' ancestor, to bring back to the listeners the memory of a long forgotten past.

However, these works, as well as other Hellenic texts on the same subject matter, seem to perform a return to a lost golden age somewhere from the past, which man has no means of recovering owing either to a loss of knowledge, or to some terrible accident, natural or humanly caused. Thus, man confines himself to a dreamlike picture, a longing for a kind of Platonic archetype beyond his reach.

This sense of loss is also recurrent in Hebrew prophetic texts of the Old Testament or the Book of the Apocalypse in the New Testament. The prophet also named as the seer —rôh-eh— or the visionary —ho-zeh— and the dreamer —hô-hem— spoke about a messianic golden age lost for humankind because of original sin (Salvador & Chaves 1967: 4). Notwithstanding, the hope of recovering that Edenic status presented itself through God's will to redeem man, thus creating a land of justice where the humble ones would reign and the proud men would know their fall. The Alliance with God also meant the reestablishment of the bond between this earthly world and transcendence. The Book of the Apocalypse, the only prophetic book of the New Testament, revealed a new perfect era after the end of this defective world of ours.

All these ancient works show signs of an urge to change the prevalent conditions without, however, being able to perform it by means of just human toiling and knowledge. So, they either turn to an enchanted imagined forlorn past, or seek divine help to make the dream come true. In contrast, medieval society, with its social stability and almost uniform ethical and religious values, withdrew from the utopian thought and discourse. The relative sceptical spirit which had fed the debate about what actually existed and what might be brought into reality implied a polemic attitude which meant dissolution of an otherwise rather consistent world vision (Ruyer 1950: 146). In fact, works such as St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* were written whenever heretic or enemy groups put Orthodox Christian faith or secular institutions into question. However, St. Augustine does not propose a bettered world to live in our earthly course; he presents a real celestial city in opposition to an impious humane Rome, a poor corrupted copy, in Platonic terms, of God's archetype (Ruyer 1950: 150). So, there is no improving social scheme for men during their penitence in the material world.

The drive to change the body politic, the need to reform social and political institutions in order to correct injustice and create more pleasant societies came as a result of the humanistic studies which were developed during the Renaissance. The transformation of a limited unchangeable world into a new universe, infinite and unknown, shook all the conventional beliefs. The discoveries, together with Galilee's and Kepler's astronomic theories opened new perspectives and questioned the prevalent paradigm in multiple ways. Man was defied by new challenges. Being no longer at the centre of the universe, he felt a new responsibility for everything that happened. Divinity was no more accountable for men's wrong doings and was not always present to correct them. The rediscovery of classical values which was part and parcel of the philological studies both of the Greek and Roman legacies started in fourteenth century Italy and spread all over Europe during the next centuries. Thus it gave birth to the new literary forms as well as to the rejection of the scholastic philosophical thought. The yearning to know more and more triggered off a questioning posture and a more daring attitude towards new experiences both in science and in the political structure of society. Simultaneously, this new learning meant also a new ignorance, as C. S. Lewis (1954) stated and so, the sceptical doubt that Ruyer considered a necessary condition to the utopian way of thinking became prevalent among scholarly men.

As far as England was concerned, the religious controversy, which would eventually bring about the Reformation and the schism with the Roman Catholic Church, added another facet to the various doubts about the human condition and ability as a rational being. As Fernando de Mello Moser states, "it is true that man continued to be considered, just as before, "a proud and yet a wretched thing," but while the Reformers tended to be obsessed by the corruption of man, the major humanists preferred, in the wake of Pico della Mirandola, to emphasize the dignity of man" (Moser 1979: 155).

Thus education was considered as a main goal to be attained by all men who wished to contribute to the emergence of a more rational, and therefore, a more just society. The accurate study both of the classics and of the Scriptures heightened a critical and more correct perspective of things. Moreover, it would enable man to perfect his own ethical and spiritual being and prepared him to play a civic role within the community. Thus, humanistic principles applied to private and public duties of the individual.

The educational *curricula* offered to the men of the high and middling classes implied the attendance of boarding schools and university courses. The training acquired in these institutions through the teachings of schoolmasters and members of the clergy assured the spiritual and utilitarian capacities of their pupils as future family leaders and men with professional careers.

In this light, Thomas More's *Utopia* not only falls within the inquisitive spirit of the age, but stands as a guide book for those noble and gentlemen who must receive an education in ethical and political matters in order to be of service to their community. However, the educational objectives of More's work confine to a masculine universe. Together with Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1531), Thomas Elyot's *The Governour* (1531) or Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1560), the teaching of civic virtues based on Scriptural and classical authorities was aimed at a very restricted reading public, namely an aristocratic and genteel manly circle. Women were not included in the humanistic citizen's education. As Hilda L. Smith points out, "most humanists admitted that women had the ability to learn; it was simply a question of what they would do with such learning and whether it might interfere with their more important responsibilities as wives and mothers" (Smith 1996: 11).

Thus, More's *Utopia,* in that it directs itself to that particular male universe, expresses what the author thought or hoped that his England might become for them. In so doing he excludes from his dream vision a significant part of the society he is somehow critically mirroring.

In fact, the island of Utopia, besides the completely organised urban plan of its fifty-four cities and the productive communal structure which supports the country's economy based on traditional agricultural and manufacturing, presents a rather revolutionary social structure. The emphasis on merit instead of birth privilege to define man's place in society seems to guarantee fairer opportunities for everybody. Moreover, all Utopians have access to free education in order to improve themselves in intellectual and especially spiritual matters.

Granting equal opportunities of learning to both men and women, it would seem that Thomas More is overlooking the aforesaid discrimination, which was current in sixteenth century England educational prospects. Indeed, the attention he gave to his daughters' intellectual progresses seems to support that notion as well. Nevertheless, his notion of female education, in spite of his affection towards his daughters, strongly differs in the goals he envisages as ways of fulfilling their lives. Whereas men would embark upon a civic career, women, his daughters included, should learn in order to become better wives and mothers. Notwithstanding the amount of philological exercises he demanded from his daughters, the qualities he highlighted in a woman consisted of the Christian virtues of piety, modesty, charity and humility (Smith 1996: 21).

When considering the Utopian commonwealth, the readers are told women should perform their house duties, namely, preparing the meals, taking care of the children, helping in every household activities and supporting their husbands in times of war (More 1989: 58-59; 92).

So, Utopian women are once again defined according to the roles men attributed them throughout their lives. They are viewed as men's daughters, prospective brides to be prepared for their wifely role, then mothers and, sometimes, widows. They have no other titles within the economy of Thomas More's text; that is, they get no identity of their own during the different stages of their lives, always depending on their fathers' and especially on their husbands' status.

The patriarchal criteria, which were to linger on for centuries, reflected the hierarchical distribution of power among the members of Utopian society, despite the apparently classless system it exhibits. A syphogrant's wife was a woman of some importance, ruling the domestic affairs, taking care of the orphans of tender age, sitting with her husband on the most honourable places at the dinner table (More 1989: 59). A tranibor's wife would be even more important and the priests' wives the most important in the whole country, except for women who were priests themselves (More 1989: 102).

No public roles were ever attributed to women with the exception of priesthood. All their duties and range of activities confine themselves to traditional tasks within the domestic arena. The silent, chaste and obedient woman model agreed with the Scriptural description of the woman as man's helpmate on account of having been born from a part of his body (Genesis, 2: 18-23). S. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians was also very often quoted to stress the female's subordinate role in relation to man's: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let wives be to their own husbands in everything" (Ephesians, 5: 22-24).

The Biblical and Aristotelian view of woman's physical and intellectual inferiority is here reiterated. Woman's weakness, made obvious in the Book of Genesis, brought about mankind's loss of Paradise, a stigma that was to follow women throughout the times. Her physical fragility together with her alleged but passive capacity in the reproductive process also granted her a secondary role in Creation, where man represented rationality, strength and active reproductive abilities. Therefore, it was man's duty to guide her, helping her to overcome some of her "natural" defects. So, before going to their religious service, Utopian women and children must kneel before the head of the family, the husband and father, to confess their misconduct and be forgiven (More 1989: 104).

The parallel between women and children clearly demonstrates their minority status, an everlasting childhood which no industrious behaviour seems able to overcome, at least in earthly society. The female's responsibility, even in

spiritual matters suffered the mediation of patriarchal authority: if a woman had vowed anything unto God, the husband had the power to disavow it (Numbers, 30: 6-8).

Although Thomas More and, for instance, Juan Luis Vives encouraged learning for women, they restricted that training to matters aiming at the development of female Christian virtues, thus moulding the most adequate male companions without jeopardising domestic harmony. The asymmetry between a masculine and feminine Renaissance presents two divergent trends. On the one hand, there is the pagan or classic frame of mind, which points to a civic fulfilment with an ingrained notion of social change and progress; on the other hand, a Judaeo-Christian one which sustains a kind of stasis in earthly affairs but overcome in a celestial afterlife.

Juan Luis Vives, one of the most prominent humanists also acknowledges the need for such guidance. His most widely read conduct book, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*, 1540, dedicated to princess Mary, Henry VIII's and Catherine of Aragon's daughter, reminds his male readers of the myth of Creation and the Aristotelian arguments to justify the need to guard and direct a daughter. The emphasis on chastity is constructed in relation to the particular spaces women should be allowed into in their daily activities. Good women, either virgins or chaste wives, are to be kept indoors, whereas fallen women are those who dare walk "abroad," that is, in public areas. Women should efface themselves avoiding both being seen or heard (Aughterson 1995: 67-72).

The Utopian commonwealth, though, allows women to embrace priesthood, thus contradicting the rule of silence in public activities. However, this allowance only contemplates widows "of advanced years" (More 1989: 102) in order to preserve their prior duties as wives and mothers. Their acceptance as members of the clergy equals civic death. As these widows are no longer useful as far as their womanly performance is concerned, they may devote themselves to God as if in expectancy of their ultimate fate. They become sexless women, almost ungendered creatures in the eyes of God and of their fellowmen.

Although pretending to defend the notions of equal chances of enhancing women's moral and intellectual abilities, keeping them in the periphery of humanistic civic principles goals constitutes a denial of their participation in the commonwealth as citizens. The almost medieval stereotype of hierarchical structure both in the family and in the public arena pervades the Utopian commonwealth in relation to gender questions. In this apparently egalitarian society, a biased view of woman prevents them from participating in the social project of a perfect society.

Thus, the gendered opposition between man's perfectibility and woman's inability to improve her alleged natural self undermines Thomas More's fiction. In so doing, it introduces a distorted image of the best state described by Raphael and recounted by More, that is, it implies a Dystopian factor in an otherwise utopian proposal.

Krishan Kumar in his *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* distinguishes the concepts of anti-utopia and dystopia. The author considers the former term more generic than the latter, which was introduced by John Stuart Mill, in a speech delivered in the House of Commons in 1868. There he made a direct reference to More's *Utopia*:

> It is, perhaps, too complementary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or caco-topians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable. (Kumar 1987: 447)

However, the imagery chosen by Kumar to define the anti-utopian —or dystopian— element fits entirely into the conservative Judaeo-Christian values, which hindered humanists to envisage a world unbiased in terms of gender: "'the worm in the bud' and 'the thorn in the rose': the pessimistic counterpoint to the optimistic visions of history and humanity, like the serpent coiling itself around the apple tree in the Garden of Eden" (Kumar 1987: 102).

Thomas More seems completely unaware of a female need to be seen in another light, as someone being able to participate in the understanding of that new world Renaissance men were so anxious to build. He did not consider the possibility of liberating women from the private sphere, although acknowledging their spiritual and intellectual potential.

In spite of Christine de Pisan's efforts to defend the woman's right to a professional career just at the beginning of the fifteenth century (*La Cité des Femmes*, 1404, translated into English in 1521 by Brian Anslay with the *title The Boke of the Cyte of Ladys*), or the countless works Renaissance women were to write in Tudor and Stuart times in a timid gesture to break a somewhat misogynistic approach of human condition, Thomas More's *Utopia* holds to the old social pattern.

The critical tone, which permeates *Utopia*'s Book One apparently defies the old order, whereas Book Two asserts man's ability to change his world into a better place. Notwithstanding, this kind of hybris is denied for the feminine part of mankind. To object to woman's equal ability to improve by means of political, economical and, therefore, social reforms means to conform to the Christian philosophy of resignation and suffering as the proper human lot. This,

according to Kumar denotes a deeply ingrained anti-utopian temperament (Kumar 1987: 103).

George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams suggest in their introduction to the text the central topics of deliberative oratory, honour and expediency — *honestas* and *utilitas*— constitute an obvious strategy in the construct of More's (or Raphael's) argumentative process. Any action may be advisable on the grounds that it is honourable or expedient, the best case consisting of the conjunction of both conditions (More 1989: xxii). However, in gender issues one may argue whether the honourable conduct recommended for women does not result in a behavioural code only expedient to men. As Stuart Mill would say, it was too bad to be practicable for women.

If so, the ideal commonwealth envisaged by More does not suit real women with humanly aspirations and potentialities. It only aims at a perfect world for men having as companions silent and industrious feminine ghosts, Petrarchan images apart from reality. Thus, for the female half of the inhabitants of this dream island it becomes a nightmarish proposal devoid of hope, and perhaps the first involuntary feminist dystopia.

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