

Gil Vicente and Thomas More construction of a perfect community: "Frágua d'Amor" in the imagination of a new world

Maria Leonor García da CRUZ

Centro de História-FLUL, Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal

ml.garciacruz@gmail.com

Abstract

Two contemporary 16th century authors, close to the ideas of Christian humanism, one Portuguese, Gil Vicente, the other English, Thomas More, write in the first quarter of the 16th century using the created image of a perfect principality (Castle/Kingdom and the Island of Utopia). This supposedly real archetype is revealed following exploratory land and sea voyages, depending on the case. In comparison with societies whose experience moves away from that model (European societies mainly of Portugal and England), they critically and sarcastically analyse social and mental flaws by way of the use of a carnivalesque narrative discourse. At the same time, they reveal virtues desirable in political ethics and put forward practical civic solutions to correct the regime. The comparative analysis of two testimonials from that era, *Utopia* by Thomas More (1516) and *Frágua d'Amor* (Love Forge) by Gil Vicente (c. 1525), of their similarities in terms of objectives and discursive techniques but also of their own definitions of identity, enrich our knowledge of mentalities in the Modern Age.

Keywords: Gil Vicente, Principality, Public decency, Laughter, Utopia

1. An archetype of the perfect principality

In Gil Vicente, in *Frágua d'Amor*, two travellers discuss wonders, the first about a perfect Castle (Pilgrim's speech) then about a perfect Prince (Wanderer's speech). In Thomas More, it is a philosophising Traveller, Hythlodæus, who defines in a narrative style his impressions of his voyage to the island of Utopia.

If the first author posits that, the *voyage* results from a tradition of journeys, especially over land and symbolically religious, the second author introduces the news of journeys and sea discoveries and the experience of a Portuguese navigator who travelled across the seas of America to Asia and contacted different peoples who were unfamiliar to the European. In both cases, the voyage represents discovery and, after all, initiation in a journey in pursuit of an idealised imaginary world, albeit supposedly real.

By comparing both speeches, considerations of a moral nature, enhancement of civic virtues in addition to the images of an ethical-religious nature, in a renaissance environment, connect the works to a time of transition that characterises 16th century Europe, at least in the first half of the century.

In the play by Gil Vicente a Pilgrim is interested in a Castle founded by the mighty that had for long been praised (its fame is universal, spreading through palaces and shantytowns), built on a good spot, somewhere in Castile, turreted and walled, strong and graceful, happy. In the context of the marriage (*desponsório*) of D. João III King of Portugal with the Spanish infant D. Catarina, the castle represents the princess as being of noble and virtuous birth.

Among the virtues that safeguard the fortress, Gil Vicente registers three theological virtues - Faith, Charity, and Hope - presupposing belief and full and free submission to God, trust in eternal life and love for one's fellow man.

Although the inhabitants of More's Utopia do not follow a religion in an institutionalised way as is done in the Christian principality, the similarities to the Portuguese author's thoughts are remarkable: valuing the belief in the

immortality of the soul and eternal happiness¹; total and free submission to a belief and to a complete philosophy of public good that presupposes relations of communion of interests and peace between the inhabitants of the island.

Other virtues referred to by the Portuguese author can also be enhanced with similarities found in More. I am talking about Goodness, the Castle's tallest tower, and Wisdom. It should suffice to recall the belief shared in the writings of the two thinkers in the value of good works to guarantee happiness after death. On the island of Utopia, it becomes the duty of a human to save and comfort his fellow man.

Love (Cupid, principal captain) will have led the King of Portugal, already famous for his victories and the extension of his conquests, for having easily and quickly taken the Castle *whose gates are of honesty / the keys of devotion / accoutrements of reason / weapons of sanctity*.

In Gil Vicente, it is the final definition of the principality / castle itself with Portuguese arms / political regime kingdom that guides its conduct by reason and by faith. The foundations of its increasingly greater power are its *merits*, i.e., the practical manifestations of a political ethics of a Christian ideal whose virtues and good works / merits are extended to the subjects and provide them with a way of salvation / eternal happiness.

The laws of the island of Utopia also have an objective of happiness that goes beyond everyday practice and the short period of time and seek to guarantee what More's work so often insists on: public safety.

2. The forging of a new mankind

Gil Vicente's work uses a time of festivity and renovation to transform positively people according to the virtues of the new queen, the prince, and his politics. Love - Cupid had already renewed bonds with the Emperor², altered feelings, and calmed dissensions.

It is now time to change men. How? By way of a huge forge and the intense work of the smiths, in a fitting renaissance environment. In fact, on stage are shown smiths-planets with their hammers, accompanied by young woodland girls with tongs ("gozos d'amor"), captained by Cupid.

The arrival of such an excellent Queen and the start of an era of new governors were sufficient reason for the re-forging of the *Portuguese people* and the creation of a *new world*, in the words of the god of love. The objectives emerge clearly explained: all individuals, in life, may correct themselves.

According to the god of love, Negroes, moors and rustics (villains) may alter their condition and gain happiness. Anybody can refine him or herself and enhance their value similar to transformed gold from the mine. Such aims appear to come close to the pleasure (but good and honest) that in Utopia would be the main objective of life.

It should be noted however that among the characters that in Gil Vicente are submitted to the forge to undergo change, it is especially Fernando, a converted Negro, who comes out unsatisfied. He manages to change his physical appearance, becoming white and resembling a European but not in his speech, stereotyped, that reveals him as an African. In a situation that becomes ironic and causes laughter, the essence of the truth is also reaffirmed here, the truth that cannot / must not, in the viewpoint of the time, be changed.

Fernando's conversion did not bring him religious culture nor did it educate him in the standards of language. In addition, the Fool, in his parlance, apparently reveals himself highly uneducated.

However, the topic of education is much more complex and to it is connected the usefulness and functionality of that same education in society, in the common good safeguarded by virtuous leaders.

For whom and for what does culture serve and does education as it is oriented in the Portuguese society of the time result in friars with no priestly conscience, noblemen with no honour,

corrupted justice? More also highlights the idle education and the contagion of vice in England in his dialogues. Thus, admiration for the regime on the island of Utopia that promotes learning of letters and useful things and guides the education of the inhabitants towards contempt for the ostentatious and superfluous (use of precious metal and jewels, for example).

In close relationship with the usefulness of the individuals themselves and social strata is also their productivity. On the island of Utopia only a very restricted number of intellectuals are not occupied with crafts or farming. Among them are included magistrates, chosen for their integrity and superior intelligence among the more gifted citizens, as well as priests of an exceptional nature and the prince himself. The man of the street in turn who has been trained liberally and in agriculture can only travel when his services are temporarily dispensable. The point of contact with Gil Vicente's thoughts is clear in several of his works³: promoting continuity in successive generations; overrating the farmer and the cattle producer; condemning social parasites, and in *Frágua d'Amor* when he creates a monk who was a former carpenter who wishes to become a nobleman and warrior (of a just war) in order to be useful for the State.

3. Emergence of a new world by correcting a corrupted society

Among the standard characters, that Gil Vicente uses in his play is Justice. It is a vehicle used to criticise strongly one of the pillars of royal governance. It is no surprise it is chosen to figure among the facets of society that should be regenerated to build a new world. It is an increasingly hunched representation due to the weight of the gifts it receives. Corruption invalidates its symbols *par excellence*, the stick, and scales, from remaining upright.

Only after being hot forged a number of times can the chickens and partridges received as gifts be extracted as slag and with even greater difficulty large bags of

money. It appears that the final desired transformation is obtained when forging a beautiful and upright woman.

Would it cease to want to answer favourably to *Gentlemen's requests*, as before it complained, by begging for smaller hands and less hearing?

The advice of the god of love is that it follows as its model the acts of Emperor Trajan. It is not known whether at any time or place Justice ever listened to and followed such wise advice. If we reflect on the words of Hythlodæus in More's work, good advisors were few and rarely heeded for a governing practice of public good, given the use of sycophancy in many who prefer self-promotion. In the England of the time a cruel justice with penal codes was practiced that made no distinction between the severity of the punishment and the nature of the crimes.

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Other characters that Gil Vicente puts on stage are members of the regular church, i.e., monks. One of them, Friar Funil, shows a total absence of awareness of his priestly condition, the rules of his order, and the uncontrollable desire to live a worldly life. In a similar position to his, ready to be submitted to the forge and become laymen would be another seven thousand...

Nevertheless, it is not only the Church and the lack of pastoral vocation of many of its members that Gil Vicente is critical.

The religiosity and Catholicism of the playwright resist his very often critical and even sarcastic spirit with regard to the secular and regular members of the Church of Rome (from the simple parish priest to the monk or the Pope himself) when they remove themselves from the

doctrine and example of Christ. He shows an evangelical humanism in many of his works.

Several passages of More's work refer to priests as merciful men and how important they were in forging the character of youths and in correcting the conduct of the inhabitants of the island of Utopia.

Other critical observations are noted in the work of Gil Vicente by way of the creation of another monk, Friar Rodrigo. After several crafts, among which that of carpenter in the neighbourhood of Lisbon's Ribeira, Rui Pires became a monk. He nevertheless continued to live a restless life outside the monastery. He wanted to become a layman once again. However, what kind of layman? He wished to be a nobleman. He wanted to be a warrior. Moreover, he was passionate, a vassal of the god of love.

The references he makes in his speech to the extraordinary abundance of monks in all Christendom are of great interest, especially as to their uselessness for war, by notably referring to the war against the Moors. He considers that at least a third of monks should be re-forged and transformed into lay warriors⁴.

Members of an ultimate social stratum deserve in *Frágua d'Amor* the observation of spectator. I refer to nobles of different categories.

These are not only the warrior-noblemen that Gil Vicente considers of great usefulness in the Portuguese society of the overseas expansion, through the speech of Friar Rodrigo. It is not the Marques of Vila Real either, to whom he refers respectfully by considering him a perfect gentleman and by fully dispensing him from being submitted to any transformation in the forge.

The absence of noblemen on stage is nevertheless significant. We see pages and servants that bring their messages. Such a situation on its own qualifies another part of society that follows the rules of privilege, which does not beg for a transformation but naturally expects to be served.

The representations are close to the harsh criticisms of parasitism and idleness in English noblemen made in

More's dialogues.

The marquis demands that the forge be immediately taken to his residence. Another nobleman, Vasco de Foes, already ridiculed by the stratagems that he uses to appear younger, futilely orders to be transformed into a child. Finally, a third nobleman, the Earl of Marialva enquires of the possibility of being rejuvenated in his body and soul but on the condition that his money is not touched. What he really wanted was to be embellished in the forge in order to make more money without giving any to anyone else.

The latter two cases are negative characters that reveal falseness and futility, greed and lack of goodness. They are close to the representation of the corrupt and rapacious noblemen of the observation in Thomas More's speeches on the England of the time, that just like some of the wealthy and clergy, they are not content with the idle life and life of pleasure that they live nor with the income they receive that, as is stressed, give nothing to the common good, but they still steal arable space, provoke mendacity and vagrancy in the English countryside and cities, despair and violence.

On the island of Utopia, justice is established because it is a true community that had no private property and did not use currency (channelling that obtained to the national treasury).

4. Cathartic laughter as a conclusion

In the explanation of how the forge works, the *frágua do amor* or *the love forge*, with the ability to fix the Portuguese and make a new world emend, laughter is roused by the way candidates are enticed to change their physical appearance, the colour of their skin, even their age. In fact, what is wanted, instead of superficial and futile alterations, is to improve the conduct and moral values of the Portuguese, rendering them more truthful in their nature and upright in their conduct in accordance with the virtues shown by those governing them.

Those who seek the forge to be transformed are the strata that feel maladjusted, like the monk who wanted to be a layman and get married, or being ambitious wanted to be a nobleman, or the idle and futile nobleman who was only concerned about his appearance or he who wants to improve himself by becoming even more miserly and thieving. The love forge, however, is guided by Christian morals and only changes the condition of the monk with no vocation who wants to become useful in the war against the infidels, and straightens Justice that has become hunched, by ridiculing the idle or vile claims of the remaining characters.

Gil Vicente also uses in a carnivalesque narrative discourse, the Negro in his stereotyped and simple speech, closely connected to ideas of food, drink, and carnal love. He shows to be a slave of Venus and wants to be physically transformed to have white traits and white skin. After having been intensely hammered in the forge, he comes out a white man but instead of speaking proper Portuguese, he expresses himself in a “Negroid” form of speech from “Guinea”. Sorry, he imagines the rejection he will be the target of by any woman, black or white, who will not cease to ridicule and despise him. Another carnival-type figure is the Fool, Vasco de Foes’s servant, whose dialogue serves to increase the ridicule of the nobleman who wants to become young.

Circumstances are distinguished by laughter and the jester / Negro or Fool is removed when seriousness is lost in more profound matters, as also occurs in More (attitude of the cardinal when the jester mixes up vagrants with mendicant monks). In Gil Vicente, the forge does not alter the social structure (transforming the Negro into a white man) nor does it operate the miracle of youth but it only corrects how each person works for the common good.

Affectation, haughtiness, and luxury are the target of ridicule in Gil Vicente’s plays, as they are by the inhabitants of the island of Utopia. This can be seen in the scene of the luxuriously dressed noble ambassadors, regarded as jesters. Idleness, greed and evil are not rewarded

but are rather addressed ironically and condemned, by seeking solutions for mankind by reversing experiences and discourses, in forms that bring the two authors closer. Both wish for public decency and that virtue is esteemed and rewarded.

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¹ On the island of Utopia atheism is absolutely rejected and Christianity begins its dissemination.

² King of Castile and Emperor of Germany, Carlos V, brother of D. Catarina.

³ Gil Vicente's known published works range

from 1502 to 1536.

⁴ It should be noted that as far as this is concerned an extended comment could be made regarding the position of the two thinkers on war and its legitimacy.

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