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Review of Marina Leslie, Renaissance Utopias and the Problem of History.

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Marina Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias and the Problem of History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. 6 pls. + vii + 200 pp. ISBN: 0801434009.

Reviewed by Katherine Rowe, Bryn Mawr College

As a canon, utopian fictions reproduce self-reflexively. Each new utopia defines itself in contradistinction to earlier ones, blurring the differences between the reformist and the satirical aims of what critics sometimes strain to classify separately as utopia and dystopia. A fundamental conceptual division underlies this self-reflexive genesis: what Marina Leslie describes in her illuminating new study as utopian "double vision." Utopian practice combines a critical and analytic look back with an idealist, prescriptive invention of the future. For writers like Thomas More, Francis Bacon and Margaret Cavendish, this double vision produces deeply allusive and intertextual fictions that cast a critical eye on the practices of humanist historiography. The early modern utopia is thus remarkable for its double temporality and double geography—not in the world or out of history, but in commerce with both. In More's *Utopia*, Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and Cavendish's *The Blazing World*, Leslie shows, utopian and European partners engage in a commerce of wit, historical matter, spiritual practices, scientific insight, and political authority. Most importantly, the reformist impulses of this genre manifest themselves in this exchange. In each of these fictions, utopia is a place where the argosies of the past were unloaded and used for better—used for the social good, and used better than in Europe—before they ever arrived at the port of Renaissance humanism.

Renaissance Utopias has its own double vision. It aims first to show the connections between utopian writing in this period and the emergence of history as a "self-conscious and rhetorically inflected interpretive practice" (14), and second to trace the history of utopia in literary and historical theory. Beginning with metacritical commentary, the first two chapters trace the critical role utopia plays in modern historiography: from Hegel and Marx—where "utopian thinking" stands as a paradigm of positivist historical narrative—to Fredric Jameson and the New Historicism—where the form instantiates sheer rhetorical and ideological constructedness, revealing and producing historical process. This is a demanding way to begin the book, but it offers the excitement of a writerly fastball. Having taken on the influential paradigms of materialist scholarship, can she hit out of the park? Ultimately, the complex cathexis that takes place around utopia in modern historical theory offers a compelling longitudinal view of the form, and gives urgency to the chapters that follow. Utopian writing cannot be reduced to any one ideology; it neither evades nor gives the lie to the telling of history. Its interest, as Leslie persuasively shows, is its local, critical interrogation of history as subject and process.

Both More's and Bacon's utopian fictions, the center of this study, interrogate two crucial ambivalences of contemporary humanist scholarship. In different ways, they confront the competing claims of historical documentation and rhetorical performance in the project of translation, and the double status of history as a record of inquiry and as a way of knowing by inquiry. In rich, absorbing readings of *Utopia*, for example, Leslie charts a dialogue of origination and revision that infuses every level of this multiply framed narrative. Her marvelous analysis of the 1516 and 1518 maps published with *Utopia* teases out the complex geographic poetics of mimesis and exchange between Utopia and Europe. With an equally rich analysis of the Utopian alphabet and nomenclature, Leslie shows that the entire power base of Utopian

society depends on advantageous translations. The tension between reform and counterfeit in such translation—made especially acute with the advent of the Protestant Reformation—was profound. In his *New Atlantis*, Bacon takes humanist translation and its internal tensions as a central metaphor for the writing of "Natural History." Reading Bacon's apocalyptic account of the scholarly community of Bensalem as an exercise in transformational history, Leslie illuminates the miraculous resolution of human artifice and divine word in the *New Atlantis*. The history of this community—in which the Old and New Testament are scientifically produced and divinely bestowed in the same historical moment—reveals the miraculous coextension of invented knowledge and natural fact.

Reading utopian fiction as critical historiography, Leslie revitalizes the genre study. While any literary kind will overrun, exceed or contradict classification on the basis of its formal features or subjects, utopia resists such strategies with particular force and liveliness. Reading literary utopia as an example of the Renaissance *genera mixta*, or mixed genre, Leslie shifts our attention from the impossible task of classification to the conceptual work utopian fictions undertake. This makes for particularly powerful intertextual readings in the final chapter on Margaret Cavendish, who borrows strategically from Aesop, Spenser, More, Shakespeare, Bacon, and others. Reading *The Blazing World* in the light of Cavendish's whole oeuvre—from the *Life of William Cavendish* to her eccentric social personae—Leslie resolves its confusing generic shifts into intelligent, revisionist play with source. Across the genres of beast fable, romance, biography, blazon, allegorical trial and morality play, Leslie shows, Cavendish systematically translates the conventions of nationalistic history. "Declaring for herself the heroic role of author," but careful not to collapse her fiction into a satirical world upside down, Cavendish describes a place "where contemplation and writing are fully revealed to be active, heroic and world-transforming" (121-22). This chapter offers a trenchant corrective to essentializing and biographizing readings of Cavendish, directing our attention to the formal exigencies of writing a woman's life in the heroic mode.

Renaissance Utopias ranges widely, despite its close focus on the nuances of early modern historical praxis. The book supplements—rather than engaging directly—the very different recent studies of utopia by Amy Boesky, Richard Halpern and Jeffrey Knapp. Its critical account of the utopian canon—an idea Leslie puts under useful and illuminating pressure—will be of seminal interest to readers of utopian fiction from Aristophanes to Swift, Borges, Calvino, and recent science fiction. The book's attention to the strategic mixing of generic modes connects it loosely to recent work on early modern travel literature and ethnography, by Mary Campbell and others. And Leslie's deft reading of the politics of natural philosophy in Bacon and Cavendish suggests fruitful cross-pollination within a circle of literary scholars interested in the discourses of early modern science, including John Rogers and Kevin Dunn. Beyond these specific interests, readers interested in humanist historiography from the standpoint of intellectual history, cultural performance, and poetics will find this study an intelligent and valuable resource.