

Understanding European Colonization: in Francis Bacon's "Of Plantations" and Michel de Montaigne's "Of Cannibals"

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on Francis Bacon's essay, "Of Plantations" (1625), and Michel de Montaigne's essay, "Of Cannibals" (1580). I will argue that the essayists discuss colonization through similar, yet conflicting lenses shaped by Humanism, religion, and political authority. Both essayists discuss purity, sin, and Edenic landscapes in the "New World" and fear European-led corruption in the new space. They, however, arrive at different conclusions regarding the justification for colonization. Examining the literature produced during this period is relevant as contemporary readers can gain a deeper understanding of the ideas that contribute to ongoing colonization today.

KEYWORDS: colonization, Eurocentrism, Humanism, Indigeneity, political authority, religion

Introduction

Throughout Francis Bacon's "Of Plantations" (1625) and Michel de Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" (1580), the writers provided insights into the ways the "New World" and Indigenous communities were understood by European thinkers during the Age of Exploration. Bacon describes how to establish successful and fruitful colonies, and Montaigne discusses the cultural practices, values, and landscape of the Tupinambá tribe in Brazil. In this paper, I will argue that comparing the two essays is productive because it opens up an interesting discussion involving how the writers' notions of Humanism, religion, and political authority shape their perspectives on colonization during the early modern period in Europe.

I will first begin this paper by discussing both writers' Humanist and religious beliefs and political positions, which I also argue, are the reasons behind the opposition between these two writers' views on colonization. As an ideology, Humanism is multifaceted, but it is generally the belief that positions human interests and welfare above all else ("Humanism n5"). Second, I will apply a comparative reading to "Of Plantations" and "Of Cannibals" in order to explain how a shared understanding of religious literature, specifically the Bible, provides both writers a fascination for purity and visualizing Edenic landscapes in new spaces. They also both recognize the potential for the "New World" to be tainted by Europeans. I will then extend this conversation of religion to the essays' implicit invocation of the story of Adam and Eve, which simultaneously complicates European notions of superiority and the colonial project. Finally, I will further explain the tension between Bacon and Montaigne's work. Bacon insists that only the European colonizers can cultivate the landscape and teach the inhabitants how to be more "civilized." He justifies colonization through profit as the land and its inhabitants are commodities that will inevitably make his country wealthier. Meanwhile, Montaigne applies a cross-cultural analysis to the Tupinambá tribe and condemns colonization. He encourages Europeans to confront their own insecurities. By looking at these factors, readers can gain a deeper understanding of what influences the writers to approach conversations about the "New World" in their respective texts.

Humanism in Bacon and Montaigne's Life

If readers wish to understand why the writers are in opposition, it is important to discuss Humanism's application in the text. First, we must situate Bacon and Montaigne in their historical context and understand their

credibility as thinkers. Both writers were well educated and hold authority in European society. Their opinions have swayed both historical and contemporary readers. Bacon was a Humanist, philosopher, essayist, and politician. He was raised as a Calvinist and was also the inventor of the Scientific Method (Klein and Giglioli). Montaigne was also a Humanist, philosopher, and essayist, but he was a Catholic (Foglia and Ferrari). As Humanists, they valued human agency and exploration as means to learn more about the world. While Humanism is not a monolithic philosophy by any means, I argue that for Montaigne and Bacon, Humanism was inseparable from religion. The combination of their respective religions and versions of Humanism is what separated them from justifying colonization. However, Bacon's position in politics and science also played a role in his attitudes towards colonial project.

Colonization Through Bacon and Montaigne's Notions of Humanism, Religion, and Political Authority

Bacon's Humanism took on a more pragmatic form because he was a man of science and government, yet he was also informed by his religion. For example, Sarah Irving argues that Bacon's concerns regarding Indigenous dispossession were not primarily moral but instead, epistemological as he wants to return to "mankind's original empire of knowledge." (252). Irving's argument is compelling because the use of the word "original" evokes this sense of beginning and genesis, which is quite relevant in biblical terms (the Original Sin). Irving's comments simultaneously contribute to why Bacon may have justified the colonial project; to him, it was a science experiment. His work on the scientific method allows us to make an inference about "Of Plantations," as it can certainly be read as a guide on how to manipulate certain variables, like the "savages", to reap the benefits of the responding variable (Bacon 395).

Montaigne, however, admires Indigenous nations, their culture, and their knowledge systems, whether it is their traditional cuisine, such as the root drinks, or their values around war (Montaigne 338, 34). I argue that Montaigne's Catholic upbringing may have been why he could not rationalize imposing European ideas on the Indigenous nation in the essay, as it could be interpreted as a sin to indoctrinate or deceive innocent people. For example, when Montaigne discusses the prophets of the Tupinambá tribe, he asserts that false revelations made by the prophets led to severe punishment; Montaigne is fascinated with this idea as he writes, "divination is a gift of God; that is why its abuse should be punished as imposture" (339). Montaigne's

assertion demonstrates his belief in the sanctity of the Word of God and how it should never be manipulated. He seems to be quite rigid in the idea of religious agency and justice.

Moreover, Montaigne was not in the same political position as Bacon. It was likely that he was not compelled to compromise his belief system in ways politicians around him had to. In Alain Legros' work, we learn that Montaigne was a very religious person but chose to express his ideas in a more secular way because of his belief in Humanism, where he "considers the Human aspect of Christian faith and religion to be within his purview" (12). Legros' comments suggest that despite Montaigne's attempts at secularism, inevitably he is influenced by his religion, meaning his Humanism was also informed by his Catholic upbringing. Both Montaigne and Bacon employ Biblical ideas such as purity and Edenic spaces in their writing, indicating that both writers are heavily influenced by their respective religions.

The Language of Purity and the Garden of Eden in "Of Plantations" and "Of Cannibals"

The writers' discussions of purity and nature interact with the Garden of Eden. In Bacon's work, he emphasizes how he prefers colonies in "a pure soil" and expands on this sense of purity as he dedicates a large part of the essay to the crops that the colonies will yield. He even takes the time to list and categorize the crops (Bacon 393-4). While there is economic importance throughout Bacon's essay, he begins the piece by saying colonies are "ancient, primitive, and heroic" spaces (393). Bacon's comments about purity and primitivity, I argue, are inherently connected to the Garden of Eden as his choice of diction invokes this Biblical story that his society believes is the precursor to European society.

In "Of Cannibals," Montaigne's discussions about purity focus primarily on Tupinambá' culture as he compares them to the landscape: "those people are wild, just as we call wild the fruits that Nature has produced by herself and in her normal course" (Montaigne 337). Montaigne's emphasis on nature and fruits is comparable to the crops that Bacon discusses in his work. Montaigne also stresses that the purity and order that comes with being "uncivilized." He claims that this is essentially non-existent in European society (337). Montaigne further extends the comparison to the land and climate of the Americas. He says that his witnesses have told him that the mild climate is why the people are so healthy: "they [Montaigne's witnesses] have assured me that they never saw one palsied, bleary-eyed,

toothless or bent with age" (338). Montaigne's claims steer the reader towards the understanding that the Tupinambá tribe live in the kind of paradise conceived in the Garden of Eden as it is free from sickness and pain. While the language of purity and the use of landscape in Montaigne and Bacon's work function differently, both implicitly invoke the story of Adam and Eve. Due to Eve's misdeed in the Garden, all humans are born with the capacity to sin. If the land is as pure and Edenic as the writers describe it to be, then the inhabitants of that landscape must also be pure. An influx of otherness, or, in this case, colonizers, into the region will certainly taint the land. Montaigne's discussions about the Tupinambá tribe resemble the Garden of Eden before Eve ate the fruit. Montaigne imbues the same ignorance and innocence that Adam and Eve exemplified onto the Tupinambá people. He also insists that contact with European knowledge systems would result in the Indigenous peoples being "tricked" as they would regret learning from the Europeans since they will no longer have the innocence they once held (343). Montaigne reassigns the role of the Serpent from the Garden of Eden to the Europeans. His essay works against the colonial project as it complicates ideologies of European superiority.

Bacon disagrees with Montaigne and is happy for Europeans to take on the Serpent-like role as he encourages colonizers to send the "savages" to Europe so they can appreciate a place "better" than their own (Bacon 395). Interestingly, Bacon's claim that Europe is a better place than the "New World" conflicts with his earlier discussions about how not all Europeans are inherently good and civilized. For the colonial project to be successful, he states that the "scum of people and the wicked condemned men" cannot be sent to the colony because they will "spoil the plantation" (394). If Bacon wants motivated workers to come to the colonies, why would he send the Indigenous people to Europe if they could witness the "scum of people" (394)? Unlike Montaigne, Bacon believes that there are Europeans pure enough to manage and cultivate the colonies, like noblemen and gentlemen (394-5). Bacon justifies his colonial project by stressing that men should be allowed to profit off the wilderness because "they have God always, and His service, before their eyes" (394). Bacon never really thinks of religion in his essay, unless it is to push his own agenda.

This particular agenda can be attributed to his political power in England at the time. As someone who held titles like Lord Chancellor and Solicitor-General, he was likely writing for an English audience who was funding or exerting political influence over the colonial

project (Klein and Giglioni). It is perhaps most evident towards the end of the essay as he argues, “it is the sinfulness [sic] thing in the world to forsake or destitute a plantation once in forwardness” (395). Given that European colonization of new lands was heavily driven by economic gain, Bacon was in a position predicated on evaluating the wealth that was to be accumulated from the colonies. If he were to discuss and critique European influence over Indigenous communities in ways Montaigne had, I argue that Bacon would have likely been stripped of his political titles. Bacon’s comments, whether he stood by them or not, were inevitably reflective of a political agenda.

Conclusion

By applying a comparative lens to “Of Plantations” and “Of Cannibals,” we witness how Humanism, religion, and political authority inform the writers’ perspectives on colonization and whether or not they could justify its purpose. Montaigne and Bacon share some similar views on colonization in their essays, given their discussion of Biblical ideas such as purity and corruption of Edenic spaces. However, they ultimately conceive the colonial agenda differently. Bacon’s political position and focus on profit and commodifying the land and its people enable him to support colonization. Montaigne’s essay stands in stark contrast to Bacon’s as his writing reflects skepticism around European superiority and colonization. These works urge those interested in the discourse about ongoing colonization to trace colonial attitudes and mindsets back to literature from early modern Europe. As contemporary readers, we recognize the inherent issues at play in both works and can understand how Montaigne and Bacon’s views shape our notions of colonialism, economics, religion, and Humanism. Moreover, many more contemporary readers are exploring the functions of ongoing colonialization and its effects on Indigenous nations across the globe today.

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