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SPEAKING WITH A FORKED TONGUE: KINGSLEY'S CLASS POLITICS IN WESTWARD HO!

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Synopsis:

By means of an analysis of Kingsley's often puzzling position toward the class problems of his time, the paper attempts to foreground the ideological function of the enterprise of Westward Ho! in regard to Victorian class issues.

1. Introduction

According to Patrick Brantlinger, both the early and the mid-Victorians did not strongly feel the need to defend or to rationalize English imperialism, believing as they did in its righteous and philanthropic cause. According to this view, Harriet Martineau's *Dawn Island* (1845) is an exemplary document about Victorian faith in, and optimism about, the "white race's mission." Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), the popular Victorian writer and champion of muscular Christianity, is remembered as someone who glorified the triumphs of the British. Kingsley's advocacy of masculinity and Christianity played a great role in supporting imperial rule by propagating a sense of "Englishness" to the public. To quote James Elie Adams, "the rapid diffusion of Kingsley's 'school' reflects the readiness with which it was adapted to, and helped in turn to sustain, two demanding ascetic regimens: the Victorian cult of athleticism, and British imperial rule" (108-109).

It is in this imperial context that the literary tradition of the early and mid-Victorian period can be understood. According to Billie Melman, eminent Victorian thinkers, such as Kingsley, Edward Bulwer Lynton, Thomas Carlyle and Benjamin Disraeli, contributed to the acclamation of national identity through "reinventing an Anglo-Saxon's national inheritance" (576-77). *Westward Ho!* (1855) and *Hereward the Wake: Last of the English* (1866) exemplify Kingsley's textual construction of an ideal "muscular identity." Kingsley's Anglo-Saxon heroes rarely doubt their ability to discover and conquer various "geopolitical mistresses." To quote Brantlinger again, "His historical adventure novel (he called it an epic) offers as its central theme the racist and sexist tautology that informs much writing about the Empire throughout the nineteenth century: the English are on top of the world because they are English" (44). C. J. W.-L. Wee also argues that along with the writing of Thomas Hughes, Kingsley's work "not merely reflected but also encouraged the imperialist mood among

sections of the English population" by its portrayal of "the image of the romantic adventurer tramping his way through exotic lands" (69). Seen in this light, *Westward Ho!* is a paean to the valor and masculinity of the English imperialists, Elizabethan and Victorian.

However, looking more closely into Victorian colonial history, one may come to reconsider the statement that the early Victorians felt no need to defend their empire and begin to suspect that Victorian adventure literature did more than simply celebrate British imperial rule. Even in the early free trade era, the dominant mood of optimism, confidence and missionary zeal was not totally unmarred by emerging self-doubts and Empire anxiety, although it may be readily admitted that the more serious blows to England's high confidence had to wait until the late Victorian and early Edwardian ages. Examples of the most scandalous colonial events that served to impair the Victorians' idealized image of themselves might have included the British settlers' brutal treatment of Tasmanians and of indentured convicts in penal Australia, particularly during the 1830s; Rajah Brooke's slaughter of Malay pirates in 1849; and Governor Eyre's massacre of Jamaicans in 1865.¹ On these colonial issues, Kingsley sided with the oppressors. For instance, Kingsley, the descendant of West Indian plantation-owners, was enraged at the charges made against Brooke (*Letters* 1: 340); and he joined with Carlyle, Tennyson and Ruskin on the Eyre Defence Fund (*Colloms* 293). Even without a consideration of these reactions, Kingsley's dedication of his book to Brooke, one of the most controversial of the Victorian imperialists, exhibits one of the motives behind the writing of *Westward Ho!*, ostensibly a nautical fiction based on certain historical events during the reign of Elizabeth I.

Given these disturbing colonial scandals, it is more appropriate to state that by depicting the Anglo-Saxon race as the liberators of oppressed "savages," both the early and mid-Victorian adventure writers wanted to "reassure" their self-conscious contemporaries of an idealized self-image. In a similar vein, Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* endeavored to convince its contemporary readership that commerce and colonization were undertaken not so much as the

mere pursuit of self-interest but were instead bound up with the more noble work of redeeming the "backward" races. Its trumpet call for militarism also sought to rekindle a martial spirit in the mid-Victorians fearful of French invasionⁱⁱ, whose confidence in the supremacy of the British army had been severely shaken by the early news of the progress of the Crimean war. As critics agree, and Kingsley himself underscores, this imperial narrative is a fictional version of Kingsley's imperialist propaganda, *Brave Words for Brave Soldiers and Sailors*, thousands of copies of which were distributed to the soldiers at Sebastopol.ⁱⁱⁱ By vindicating Elizabethan England's self-interested military interference in Ireland and Spanish-ruled South America, Kingsley sought to lend ideological support to those British soldiers fighting in the Crimea to protect English interests and influence over the Mediterranean.^{iv}

More interesting, perhaps, is the fact that Kingsley's portrayal of Anglo-Saxon martial virtues in *Westward Ho!* had significant bearings on the *domestic politics* of mid-nineteenth century England. Although the novel centers on the rivalry between England and Spain during the reign of Elizabeth I, it also contains a class-related message to its mid-Victorian readership. Within the horizon of early and mid-Victorian class struggles, the proud image of the Anglo-Saxon race as a Big Brother to the "lesser" races, this paper suggests, offers an ideological counterweight to the internal class grievances of the Empire. By recognizing this domestic dimension, a greater sense can be made of Kingsley's often puzzling positions toward the class problems of his age and the ideological function of the apparently racial enterprise of *Westward Ho!*.

2. Between Sympathy for, and Misgivings about, the Masses

Kingsley and his fellow Christian socialists were well-known for their sympathy with the working class. Kingsley's criticism of the callous and incompetent governing class, as seen in his non-fictional writings and "social problem" novel *Alton Locke*, suggests that he was well

aware of where the ultimate responsibility fell for the appalling state of the workers. For example, Kingsley protested against landlords who begrudged the extra rates needed to pay for clean drinking-water and sensible sewage systems (Colloms 175). His portrayal of the horrid spectacle of slums in *Alton Locke* (1850) jarred his middle- and upper-class readers out of their complacency. At times, he went so far as to refer to the rich as "idlers and oppressors" (*Letters* 1: 126); impulsively, he even professed himself a Chartist (*Letters* 1: 127). However, Kingsley's political position was not as simple and clear-cut as his reputation as a Christian, a socialist and a social reformer might indicate. Although his contemporaries labeled him a revolutionary, Kingsley was, in reality, some ways from being one. Despite his sympathy for the Chartists, Kingsley was too much a royalist and an aristocrat at heart to approve of revolutionary ideas. The very last thing that Kingsley wanted was a dismantling of the social and political order, as witnessed in his response to an 1848 Chartist protest.^v

What is more, Kingsley and his fellow Christian socialists sometimes seemed unconvinced of the need for "social change through legislative reform," as Kingsley's first "Parson Lot" letter might serve to indicate.^{vi} Ultimately, Kingsley believed that if the interests of any one social group should be sacrificed to avoid a national crisis, that social group should be the working class. The conservative line that Kingsley held was summarized in his advice to contemporary working-class radicals: "Emigrate, but *never strike*" (*Letters* 2: 13). With regard to Kingsley's political commitment, his friend Thomas Hughes declared:

He was by nature and education an *aristocrat* in the best sense of the word, believing, that a landed aristocracy was a *blessing* to the country, and that no country would gain the highest liberty without such a class. (qtd. in Kendall 72; emphasis added)

Even in his earlier years when he considered himself their most loyal ally, Kingsley did not believe in the competence of the masses to exercise political power judiciously. The collective prejudice of Kingsley and his colleagues against the uneducated majority was expressed in their short-lived organ "Politics for the People" which surprised readers with the

loyal, *conservative*, serious tone of its contents, and the gravity . . . with which *it attacked physical force Chartism, monster meetings, and the demand for universal suffrage* by men who had neither education nor moral self-government to qualify for a vote. (*Letters* 1: 122-23; emphasis added)

Kingsley's low opinion of the workers was confirmed by the failure of their economic movements. When the cooperative projects of the Working Men's Associations failed because of mismanagement and internal financial disputes, Kingsley in a letter in 1857 offered the following diagnosis: "[T]he working men are not fit for [the Associations]" (*Letters* 2: 65). This deep-rooted skepticism about the intelligence of the majority led Kingsley to disapprove of their political activism. His anxiety about working-class political activism caused him to oscillate between the two axes of radical sloganeering and calls for working-class moral reform. As seen in his placard written for the Chartists on April 10, 1848 and his "Parson Lot" letters, Kingsley's sympathy with the workers and his indictment of the rich were compromised by his prophetic message and proposal of working-class moral reform as a solution to the major class issues of his day.

After his rapprochement with the governing classes, facilitated by his 1859 appointment to the royal chaplaincy by the Queen, Kingsley began more openly to condemn the uneducated masses and their political campaigns designed to improve their legal and political status. In his 1866 letter to Professor Lorimer of Edinburgh, Kingsley proclaimed that

his past support for the workers' movement and its philosophical matrix of egalitarianism was a "mistake." He justified his conservative turnabout on the grounds of first-hand experience: what he considered to be the utterly incorrigible, hereditary differences among individuals. These individual differences, according to Kingsley, vindicated society's denial of equal rights to a "dangerous" population:

I held that doctrine [egalitarianism] strongly myself in past years, and was cured of it, in spite of its seeming justice and charity, by the harsh school of facts. Nearly a quarter of a century spent in educating my parishioners, and experience with my own and other's children, in fact that schooling of facts brought home to the heart,--have taught me that there are congenital differences and hereditary tendencies which defy all education from circumstances. . . . Society may pity those who are born fools or knaves, but she could not, for her own sake, allow them power if she can help it. (*Letters 2: 200*)

At the time, the masses represented for Kingsley an obstacle to the progress of the gradual civilization of society, as revealed by his apprehensions about the introduction of democratic laws. The legislation designed to ameliorate the life of the impoverished classes, he feared, would injure society by "tax[ing] . . . the products of art and civilization" and, above all, by "tax[ing] the rich for the sake of the poor, with very ugly results to civilization" (*Letters 2: 202*).

Viewed in this context, Kingsley's imperial fiction, *Westward Ho!*, turns out to carry two messages: one concerns domestic politics; the second is a justification of imperial expansionism. Imperial wars provide a context conducive to this task. The use of imperial issues in order to stabilize or manipulate domestic politics is not rare in political history.

Governments have been known both not only to use foreign wars for this purpose but have also deliberately sought to create or magnify national crises. Using patriotic claims to prioritize national order and security over the "sectarian" interests of the lower classes, governments may often deflect or drown out working-class radical discontent and demands for social justice. The function of imperialism as a safeguard of the ruling classes' vested interests was first theorized by J. A. Hobson in his *Imperialism, A Study*:

[I]t has become a commonplace of history how Governments use national animosities, foreign wars and the glamour of empire-making, in order to bemuse the popular mind and divert rising resentment against domestic abuses. The vested interests . . . play for a double stake, seeking their private commercial and financial gains at the expense and peril of the common-wealth. They at the same time protect their *economic* and *political supremacy* at home *against movements of popular reform*. (142; emphasis added)

Hobson's insight into the imperial issue accounts for the ideological use of the nineteenth-century British war narratives partially dovetails with one function of Kingsley's nautical fiction and Marryat's *Mr Midshipman Easy* and *Masterman Ready*. Yet, it does so only to a certain degree, since fictions also reflect the personal agendas of their individual authors. In the case of *Westward Ho!*, the ideological function of the narrative is complicated by the ambivalence of Kingsley's politics. Kingsley was a social reformer with a conservative streak: this explains his sympathy with the lower classes, his criticism of the governing class, his longing for benevolent leadership, and his rebuking of the masses for their "underserving" political aspirations.

Westward Ho!, describes the adventures of the Leigh brothers and other Devonshire

adolescents who together form a chivalric brotherhood for Rose Salterne, the object of their common admiration. When Rose is spirited away by a wily, urbane Spanish nobleman named Don Guzman, Rose's admirers sail to the New World in a ship named *Rose* in order to find her. However, during the rescue maneuver, Amyas Leigh loses his only brother, Frank, who is captured by Guzman's guards. On the coast of South America, the Devon adventurers are joined by a native girl named Ayacanora and subsequently financially rewarded by plundering a Spanish gold train and galleon, even though they also learn that they have lost both Frank and Rose to the Inquisition. On their way back home, they find that Ayacanora is actually not Native American but rather the illegitimate daughter of an English sea captain and a Spanish noblewoman. When Guzman attempts to invade England, Amyas defeats him but loses his eyesight. The novel ends with Amyas's reconciliation with Ayacanora, whose love he has long despised due to her Spanish heritage.

3. Criticism Couched in Eulogy

During the 1840s and early 1850s in England, working-class radicalism manifested itself in physical force Chartism and Owenism. The publication of this fiction was preceded by only six years by the massive Chartist riots in England that followed the 1848 French Revolution. Even during the 1850s, when the Great Exhibition seemed to open a new era of prosperity and opulence, militant Owenites, such as George Jacob Holyoake, continued to agitate the masses. Holyoake refused to be taken in by the "general euphoria" and advocated a total reconstruction of the social and economic system (Tholfsen 114-15). In the wake of the 1832-1850 Chartist movement, *Westward Ho!* gives voice to a double-edged criticism that issues a warning to the careless, irresponsible governing class and, at the same time, prescribes in clear terms the boundaries for the political aspirations of the working class. The latter task is enacted through subjecting the defiant members of the lower classes to differential chastisement.

Kingsley's criticism of the Victorian aristocracy is embedded in his idealization of its Elizabethan counterpart. According to Kingsley, Elizabethan aristocrats, unlike their Spanish equivalents, and also *unlike those of Kingsley's days*, were not simply leaders by birth but by personal merits. As the narrator remarks, they "were by due right the leaders of the people, by personal prowess and beauty, as well as by intellect and education" (29). Sir Grenvil is portrayed as a paragon of such aristocratic leadership. As a courtier, he is the queen's favorite, and his advice is indispensable in the decision-making at Court. He is the venerated authority of Devonshire whose guidance his people seek in times of need and crisis. Under Sir Grenvil's guidance, Amyas grows into a model warrior and leader. He alone detects and foils the surprise attack of the Italian-Spanish invaders. During his South American trip, Amyas displays humanitarianism by protecting the oppressed natives from the evil Spaniards, a task that resonates with the contemporary "mission" of the mid-Victorian imperialists in such historical events as the Crimean war.

In their encounter with a gold train from Santa Fé, Amyas and his men are outraged by the Spanish soldiers' inhuman treatment of the local population and rescue these natives from the ruthless Spanish soldiers (472-73). This virtuous and largely false picture of Elizabethan England is, of course, one designed to "highlight contemporary deficiencies" (Wee 76). In reality, Elizabethan imperialists were not as ethical as Kingsley depicts. As Nerlich in *Ideology of Adventure* asserts, sixteenth-century English overseas adventurers had the Crown's sanction for a policy of "unscrupled [sic] subjugation, extermination, enslavement of the natives of the distant land" (132). They even considered discarding felons in the American colonies, although the idea of establishing a penal colony, conceived of by Hakluyt, was not properly carried out until England used Australia for that purpose (Geer 26).

English officers possess not merely prowess but also genuine leadership abilities. As fine leadership draws strength from a healthy fellowship between the commander and those

commanded, English officers gain their men's loyalty by fostering a sense of fraternity among the ranks. As the narrator states, they "used their rank, not to differ from their men, but to outvie them; not merely to command and be obeyed, but, like Homer's heroes, or the old Norse Vikings, to lead and be followed" (387). The superiority of the English officers to their Spanish counterparts is proved when the *Rose* vanquishes the pursuing Spanish battleships. In this battle, Amyas, unlike the "cold and tyrannous" Spanish commanders, does not allow the barriers of rank and blood to distance him from his men; he works and fights alongside his sailors. The Spanish and English sailors' attitudes toward their respective captains, as a result, are marked by a wide contrast: "The black-plumed Señor was obeyed; but the golden-locked Amyas was followed; and would have been followed through the jaws of hell" (397).

Queen Elizabeth is at the pinnacle of the benevolent governing class. She is described as "the most popular sovereign, obeyed of their own free will by the freest subjects which England has ever seen." The Queen's art of governing, to which English victory over the Spanish Armada is ascribed, is eulogized in the following terms:

Well it was that Elizabeth, even in those dangerous days of intrigue and rebellion, had trusted her people enough, not only to leave them their weapons, but . . . to teach them how to use them. Well it was that by careful legislation for the comfort and employment of the "*masses*," (*term then, thank God, unknown*), she had both won their hearts, and kept their bodies in fighting order. . . . She had raised to the highest posts in her councils, her army, and her navy, men of business. . . . Well for England, in a word, that *Elizabeth had pursued for thirty years a very different course to that which we have been pursuing for the last thirty*, with one exception, namely, the leaving as much as possible to private enterprise. *There we have copied her: would to Heaven that*

we had in some other matters! (564; emphasis added)

Within this eulogy of the Queen and her admirable aristocrats, Kingsley offers a rather bold commentary on the current governing class. By pointing out the Elizabethan ruling class's popularity as the basis for their leadership, Kingsley directs the attention of his contemporary governing class to the need for redressing their relationship with the lower classes. The author's political message is explicit in the aforementioned speech: "*There we have copied [Queen Elizabeth]: would to Heaven that we had in some other matters!*" Through promoting her subjects according to their service to the country and ministering to their needs, Queen Elizabeth could secure their voluntary allegiance, of which she availed herself in wartime. Likewise, Kingsley asks his audience "whether we have not something to learn from those old Tudor times" (564). Kingsley at another time points to the Spanish ruling classes' tyranny as the cause of the decline of Spain: "[T]he Spaniards, by some suicidal pedantry, had allowed their navy to be crippled by the same despotism, etiquette, and official routine, by which the whole nation was gradually frozen to death" (388). In the class context of mid-Victorian England, this commentary serves as a warning to the English ruling class against following the ill-fated policy of the Spanish.

Nonetheless, Kingsley's call for the ruling classes' benevolence and consideration should not be attributed to his belief in egalitarianism. Even the previously quoted passage is imbued with unmistakably anti-democratic sentiments, despite its expressed concern about the needs of the people. As revealed in the parenthetical remark about the "masses" ("*term then, thank God, unknown*"), the narrator perceives working people as a threatening or, at least, as a recalcitrant social group. The "ignorant" masses, with their grievances against the political and economic system and their potential for violence, are considered a liability to the welfare of society as a whole. This view is reflective of Kingsley's own political outlook, for, despite his

enthusiastic efforts to improve their living environment, he had strong misgivings about the political movements and political intelligence of the working people.

6. Conclusion

In *Westward Ho!* Kingsley retells the story of the British-Spanish war in order to convey a bifurcated class message. He positions England as a righteous nation opposing Spanish tyranny over the world. Viewed within the context of Victorian class struggles, this praise of humane leadership delivers an unmistakable message: the Elizabethan governing classes function as a gauge to measure the shortcomings of the Victorian aristocracy.

At times Kingsley criticized the governing class of his age in straightforward terms; and the public avowal of his political views ensured that class's hostility toward him, as shown in the 1851 St. John's Church incident.^{vii} In this regard, *Westward Ho!* certainly registers the author's sympathy with the contemporary disenfranchised classes. However, this brings to light only one half of a more complicated picture. The two rebellious sailors are ultimately viewed as ignorant men. Their disruption of traditional hierarchy serves the interests of the enemy and endangers their own lives. The tragic narrative trajectories of these defiant commoners accentuate the need for radical working class individuals to fight within, rather than against, the contemporary social and economic order.

In reality, this view of the lower classes as ignorant, self-injurious masses was often employed as a means for delaying the extension of the franchise to working people. It is a common ideological construct found in the works of those Victorian social thinkers who turned to the notion of idealized authoritarian leadership as a handy remedy for the political crises of their time. Among the Victorian thinkers who advocated the rule of the strong was Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle virulently denounced the ruling aristocracy for its misgovernment. The governing classes, according to him, "have not yet learned even to sit still and do no mischief"

(*Past and Present* 243). Yet, the solution Carlyle saw to the class problems of his days, however, was not the enfranchisement of the deprived classes but an enlightened, benevolent autocracy.

Although his strong sympathy for the working class informs *Past and Present* (1843), Carlyle's prejudices concerning the lack of political intelligence on the part of the workers is eventually channeled into a denunciation of democracy:

You do not allow a palpable madman to leap over precipices; you violate his liberty, you that are wise; and keep him, were it in straight-waist-coats, away from the precipices! Every stupid, every cowardly and foolish man is but a less palpable madman: his true liberty were that a wiser man, that any and every wiser man, could, by brass collars, or in whatever milder or sharper way, lay hold of him when he was going wrong, and order and compel him to go a little righter. . . . If thou do know better than I what is good and right, I conjure thee in the name of God, force me to do it; were it by never such brass collars, whips and handcuffs, leave me not to walk over precipices! (*Past and Present* 290)

In this argument, liberty is renounced in the very interests of the "unenlightened" masses. It best serves the cause of its owner when it is yielded to the *right* political leaders, the so-called "heroes."

Like Carlyle, Kingsley's vision of an alternative order derives from contemporary disappointment at the governing class and future fear of the anarchy he believed would accompany democracy and revolution. For him, democracy was the erroneous choice of a society holding the mistaken belief that, to quote Carlyle again, "wise and great men being

impossible, a level immensity of foolish small men would suffice" (*Heroes and Hero-Worship* 202). It is a hazardous thing, and something without which the ignorant masses will be safer. As Haraszti asserts, the view that the extension of the franchise to the uneducated masses would lead to anarchy and to the confiscation of property was one expressed in both aristocratic and radical quarters in England during the 1830s and 1840s (44). In this context, *Westward Ho!* castigates both rulers and ruled, holding out hope for a newly reformed aristocracy which might "[hold] its own position firmly, but in sympathy with the people" (qtd. in Kendall 72). This is Kingsley's considered solution to the class struggles of his days.

ⁱ In the dedication of *Westward Ho!*, Kingsley makes clear his defensive attitude toward contemporary imperial issues. He proclaims that by dedicating the fiction to Rajah Brooke and George Augustus Selwyn, the warlike bishop of New Zealand, he wants to express his "admiration and reverence" for their character.

ⁱⁱ During their first attempt at invasion, the French fleet anchored in Bantry Bay for a fortnight, although they failed to land in Ireland. In *An Invasion That Failed*, E. H. Stuart Jones offers a detailed discussion of this naval incident.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thorp sees *Westward Ho!* as a recruiting novel for the Crimean war (117), a view shared by both Brenda Colloms (193) and Guy Kendall (112). Kingsley's contemporaries also interpreted this fiction as a sort of war propaganda. Colloms provides a useful summary of the views of this latter group (193).

^{iv} In his Oct 19, 1854 letter to F. D. Maurice, Kingsley wrote about the on-going war and his book:

We think of nothing here but the war. . . . It seems so dreadful to hear of those Alma heights being taken and not be there; but God knows best, and I suppose I am not fit for such brave work; . . . But I can fight with my pen still (I don't mean in controversy . . . but in *writing books which will make others fight*). This one is to be called 'Westward Ho!'. (*Letters* 1: 330; my emphasis)

For more details about the Anglo-Russian relationship, see David Wetzel's *Crimean War: A Diplomatic History* and R. L. V. French Blake's *Crimean War*. Blanche Cook's *Crimean War: Pro and Con* offers a brief survey of the mid-Victorian responses to the war

^v When the Chartists gathered on Kennington Common to present to Parliament their third petition for their Charter, Kingsley was apprehensive about the possibility of a riot. In the placard, Kingsley, presenting himself as a working parson, acknowledged the workers' sufferings. This sympathy with the Chartists' cause, however, is followed by his lecture on the urgent need for their moral reform:

You think the Charter would make you free--would to God it would! . . . Will it free you from slavery to ten-pound bribes? Slavery to beer and gin? Slavery to every spouter who flatters your self-conceit, and stirs up bitterness and headlong rage in you? That I guess is real slavery; to be a slave to one's own

stomach, one's own pocket, one's own temper. Friends, you want more than Acts of Parliament can give. . . . [T]here will be no freedom without virtue, no true science without religion . . . and love to your fellow citizen. (Letters 1: 118-19)

^{vi} In his first "Parson Lot" letter, Kingsley also asked the working class to wait till God took the matter in His own hands: "Do God's work, and you will share God's wages. `Trust in the Lord, and be doing good, dwell in the land, and, verily, thou shalt be fed'" (*Letters* 1: 126). In his second "Parson Lot" letter, Kingsley accused the rich of certain "iniquities." This indictment, however, leads to an apocalyptic message about the poor men's heavenly rewards (*Letters* 1: 126).

^{vii} See Endnote V.