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Satirical or Serious: Interpreting the True Intentions of Thomas More's *Utopia*

By Elijah Fisher

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw many artistic, political, and social movements that were influential across Europe. Humanism was one of these movements that inspired many artists, philosophers, and writers. Humanism focuses upon the human potential and the ways to achieve the greatest human good through earthly institutions. Northern Humanism, or Erasmian Humanism, focuses on education as the ultimate way to achieve the greatest moral good in society. One Erasmian Humanist, Thomas More, wrote one of the greatest Humanistic works in his *Utopia*. The true intentions of Thomas More in his *Utopia* are often debated and many question whether his work is serious or satirical in nature. However, when one carefully examines the work and the life of Thomas More, it becomes quite clear. Thomas More's *Utopia* is a work of Erasmian Humanism that utilizes a satirical tone to praise the humanistic elements while critiquing the idea of a perfect society.

Thomas More lived a very influential life in England. Being well educated as a child, More was literate in both Latin and Greek as a young man. He established himself as one of the great young scholars after he gave a series of lectures on St. Augustine's

City of God in the Church of St. Lawrence.¹ Soon after he began his career in politics. During the reign of King Henry VII, he was a burgess of Parliament and immediately made an impact. It was said that Henry VII had made unreasonable demands for money, and the Parliament rejected his demands, partly because of the efforts of Thomas More. One of the king's privy chambers, Tyler, was present and reported to the king that a beardless boy had ruined the king's efforts.² More angered Henry VII enough that had the king not died in April of 1509, More would have had to flee England for fear of death.³

When Henry VIII came to power, More fared much better and was successful in cultivating a good relationship with the new king. He was made an undersheriff, and it was during this time that he published *Utopia* in 1516. Soon after his first publication of

¹ William Roper, "The Life of Thomas More", ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Modern*, (Accessed October 24, 2022).

² Roper, "The Life of Thomas More."

It is important to note that Roper's biography is one of the closest we have to the actual life of Thomas More, and therefore is very useful. However, William Roper was the son-in-law of Thomas More. So there is a potential bias in Roper's work that must be carefully considered and other scholars such as Russel Ames have questioned the legitimacy of some of the stories told by Roper.

³ Russel Ames, *Citizen Thomas More and His Utopia*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 41.

Utopia, More resigned from his office as the under sheriff. More then began his career under the crown, a duty in which he thrived greatly, but according to Erasmus, was disinclined to do. More spent much of his time in diplomatic affairs, and grew quite popular in England due to his level of success. His work on the successful Treaty of Cambrai launched him into the spotlight and in October of 1529, he became the Chancellor of England.⁴ His fame did not last long, as the office of the Chancellor was declining, and consequently, More's influence as well. After a while, More's relationship with Henry VIII began to deteriorate, partly due to More's refusal to approve of Henry's divorce and his claim as head of the Church. This led to More's arrest and imprisonment in the London Tower in 1534, where he spent about one year before being beheaded in 1535.⁵

The events and actions of Thomas More's life had a significant impact on his ideology and shaped his thinking. Even early in More's career, he was already thinking like a reformer. William Roper details a conversation he had with More in which More listed three things he wished he could change about

⁴ The Treaty of Cambrai helped end the war between the French, King Francis I, and the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V.

⁵ Ames, 43-73; Roper, "Life of Thomas More."

Christendom. He wished for peace between Christian princes, for uniformity of religion, and that Henry VIII's marriage issue could come to a peaceful and godly conclusion.⁶ Even then, pieces of *Utopia* can be seen in More's thinking. More was also a devout Catholic and was eventually canonized as a martyr by Pope John Paul II in 1935.⁷ More's political and religious ideas were influenced by the time he lived in and by the people that he encountered everyday. His friendship with Desiderius Erasmus, who was a great scholar of that era, was extremely important to More's worldview.

More published *Utopia* in 1516 and split it into two Books. The first of which details a conversation between Thomas More, Peter Giles, and the fictitious character named Raphael Hythloday. The second is the detailing of the island of Utopia, and is explained in a monologue by Hythloday. Erasmus reveals in a biography on Thomas More that More wrote the Book 2 prior to Book 1. So for

⁶ Roper, "Life of Thomas More."

⁷ Dominic Baker-Smith, "Thomas More," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thomas-more/>.

that sake, it is important to summarize and analyze the books in that order as well.⁸

Book 2 begins with Hythloday explaining he was once a visitor to the island of Utopia, a homogeneous and peaceful island about the size of England. He provides details into how the Utopians do life, from what their households look like, to how they interact with foreign nations. Within the first few pages it is evident that More's purpose is to describe the apparent perfection of the island of Utopia. This apparent perfection is evident in how Hythloday describes work on the island. In Utopia, the majority of its people work, and the few that do not, devote themselves to study. Everyone must work in agriculture, and develop skills in two other kinds of trade. They only work six hours a day, but they are productive even when they are not working.⁹ The goal of this labor structure is to ensure that all men work equally, and when possible, for men to be free "from the service of the body, and devote themselves to the freedom and culture of the mind. For that, they think, is the real happiness of life."¹⁰

⁸Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith, eds, "Erasmus on Thomas More, 1519," in *A Thomas More Source Book*, (Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 11, Jstor.

⁹ Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton and Company, 1975), 40-44.

¹⁰ More, *Utopia*, 44.

The Utopian labor system may seem like it is missing something significant because it lacks the traditional incentive of money. Traditionally one would work for money; however, in Utopia, gold and silver are not valued the same way they are in places like Europe. Gold is used in a scornful way. Children play with gold, it is used for dinner plates, and slaves are forced to wear golden jewelry as a disgrace. While the Utopians have no personal desire for gold and silver, they keep much in their treasury, giving them much sway with other nations when necessary.

More importantly than occupations or money is Utopia's moral philosophy that sets them apart from other nations. Their primary philosophical objective is to understand happiness and pleasure. Their moral philosophy is not separate but intertwined with their religious principles. They believe God created them for happiness, and so it would be foolish not to pursue the pleasure that leads to happiness.¹¹ However, they do distinguish between what is good and honest pleasure and what is false pleasure. The good and honest pleasure is living according to nature, or in other words, living to the end God created them for.¹² The false pleasures mentioned are often related to putting oneself above

¹¹ More, *Utopia*, 54-55.

¹² *Ibid*, 55.

others. The Utopians consider wearing gaudy clothes a false pleasure. They consider it a false pleasure to wear jewelry or hoard money. Essentially these false pleasures are activities that might amuse the senses, but only a perverse mind will find true happiness in them.¹³ Now for the true pleasures, they divide them into two classes: pleasures of the body and pleasures of the mind. There are two kinds of bodily pleasures. The first is that which immediately delights our senses, such as eating or drinking. The second is when the body is in a state of good health. According to the Utopians, “health itself, when undisturbed by pain, gives pleasure, without any external excitement at all.”¹⁴ This pleasure is the foundation of all others because if one is not in a state of good health, then one cannot truly enjoy all other forms of pleasure. Out of all forms of pleasure, the Utopians value pleasures of the mind the most. Unlike bodily pleasures that are only pleasurable for the sake of health, pleasures of the mind arise from the practice of virtue.¹⁵

Another extremely important aspect of Utopian life is Utopian religion. Utopia was once the home to many different religions and sects, but Christianity quickly became the dominant religion. However, there is a strict philosophy that no one is to

¹³ More, *Utopia*, 57-59.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 60.

receive criticism for the religion he practices as long as he does so without infringing upon the beliefs of his fellow citizens. All religions in Utopia agree on the worship of the divine nature. Although a public service is held, each man is free to worship and pray to whomever he chooses during that time, and any rituals done for a specific faith are done in the private home. They do it this way to allow for the coexisting of all religions, so that peace may be had among the people.¹⁶

Book 2 gives the reader a developed understanding of the island of Utopia and Book 1 gives the reader the ability to understand Book 2 a little bit more. Book 1 is essentially a conversation around a dinner table between More, Giles, and Hythloday. More resembles Plato and what he does in his *Republic*. They discuss questions about justice and what is fair punishment. Hythloday claims without the abolishment of private property, no society can truly be happy. More and Giles are highly doubtful about such a claim, and implore Hythloday to tell them every detail about the Island of Utopia.¹⁷

However, to fully understand the effects that More's *Utopia* had on society and future societies, the meaning of *Utopia*,

¹⁶ More, *Utopia*, 78-86.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 30-34.

Books 1 and 2, must be understood. Is More trying to set up the perfect society? Is he satirical in his efforts? The answer to these questions lie in understanding More's opinion of the character Hythloday. Does More see Hythloday as wise or foolish?¹⁸ It is as though they represent two different sides of this theoretical process of thinking. Hythloday is "theoretical, innovative, universal, and impersonal. More is practical, traditional, and loyal to his family and friends, his England."¹⁹ Essentially More is presenting the traditional English way of thinking, while Hythloday is presenting something entirely new. More constructs *Utopia* through the eyes of someone like Hythloday, someone who believes himself to be wise, but lacks the actual wisdom needed to present the perfect society. More emphasizes this through the naming of "Hythloday" and the name of the city "Utopia." Hythloday means purveyor of nonsense, and Utopia means nowhere.²⁰ It is hard to look at the meanings of those names, and not conclude that More was satirical in his writing of *Utopia*.

¹⁸ Thoms S. Engeman, "Hythloday's Utopia and More's England: An Interpretation of Thomas More's Utopia," *The Journal of Politics* 44, no. 1 (1982): 132, Jstor.

¹⁹ Engeman, 135.

²⁰ Engeman 135.

It is hard to deny that there is a level of satire to More's work, but to what degree? Different scholars have different opinions. Engeman believes More has a dual intention in *Utopia*. That is, he uses Hythloday to ridicule the idea of the perfect society, but that More sees the necessity for change.²¹ Logan, another Utopian scholar, argues that More, as the author, distances himself from Hythloday as to bring his audience to a different conclusion than the one Hythloday comes too.²² More does not intend for his audience to conclude that *Utopia* is the ideal and achievable society.

Some scholars do not agree with the view of *Utopia* as satire to be the most compelling view. One scholar, Thomas White, differs with the opinion that Hythloday is the key to understanding More's true aim. He argues this because of the order in which the books were written. Since Book 2 was originally written to be its own book before the later addition of Book 1, the opinion that Book 2 is the continuation of the somewhat ridiculous character of Hythloday is faulted. Book 2 must be seen as the masterpiece and serious philosophical examination of the problems of human

²¹ Engeman, 148.

²² George M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's "Utopia,"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 130.

society, written and trumped by Thomas More.²³ Karl Kautsky, a leader in Utopian studies, agrees with White on his view that More is serious and writes *Utopia* as an attempt to propose reforms to society. He says that More “wrote his *Utopia* in Latin, and concealed his thoughts in the garment of satire, which to be sure permitted him greater freedom in the expression of his opinions.”²⁴ One of the ways to examine which of these interpretations is correct is to examine the similarities between the ideas in *Utopia* and the ideas in More’s other writings. One of the places this can be easily compared is when looking about how religion is talked. More published *Utopia* one year before Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the doors of the Cathedral in Wittenberg. So if *Utopia* represented More’s true beliefs, then surely More would have spoken positively of the Reformation. While humanists such as More and Erasmus did have critiques of the Catholic Church, they were both against Luther’s desire to do away with it

²³ Thomas I. White, “Festivitas, Utilitas, et Opes: The Concluding Irony and Philosophical Purpose of Thomas More’s ‘Utopia.’” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 10 (1978): 147-14, Jstor.

²⁴ Karl Kautsky, *Thomas More and his Utopia* (New York: Russel and Russel, 1959), 246.

entirely.²⁵ For example, when Luther critiqued Henry VIII's *In Defense of the Seven Sacraments*, More strongly defended his King in his *Responsio ad Lutherum*. More was ruthless to Luther, calling him many unflattering names, and claiming "the whole book of Luther is nothing but a sheer conglomerate of buffoonish words, with the distortion of the words of God, contempt of all the saints, and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit."²⁶ More's toleration of other religions or denominations of Christianity was not nearly as tolerant as the Utopians'. Roper quotes More as saying he hopes to "live not the day, that we gladly would wish to be at league and composition with them [protestants], to let them have their churches quietly to themselves' so that they would be content to let us have ours quietly to ourselves."²⁷ This is radically different from how the Utopians treat religious freedom and toleration. Either More's words to Luther and Roper are not true or *Utopia* does not reflect his true beliefs and desires. It is much more likely

²⁵ Steve Ozment et al., "Humanism and the Reformation," in *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (Yale University Press, 2020), 290, Jstor.

²⁶ Thomas More, "Responsio ad Lutherum," in *The Collected Works of Thomas More*, trans. Sister Scholastica Mandeville, ed. John H. Headly, (Yale University Press, 1969), 671. <https://essentialmore.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/A-Response-to-Luther-Book-2.pdf>.

²⁷ Roper, "Life of Thomas More."

that *Utopia* contains satirical elements that More uses to emphasize his true intention.

Evidently there is no absolute agreement on the intentions of More and his *Utopia*. However, most scholarship, especially more recently, leans in the direction that More was satirical in proposing this perfect society but that he did believe reform and change were necessary. More did not believe that any perfect society was feasible and considered it foolish to think any differently. While the desire for *Utopia* to be a blueprint for reform and change is admirable, that is not the intention of More. More's purpose is "not to present a proposal for actual political reform, but rather to show the limits of reasonable change and especially the dangers attached to the desire for radical change."²⁸ This view is the most compelling, and seems to fit More's own life the best.

One of the keys to understanding Thomas More's intentions in his *Utopia* is to understand his own ideas about society. More was a Northern Humanist, or an Erasmian Humanist, named for his close friend Erasmus of Rotterdam. Erasmian Humanism emphasizes the importance of education as the method of bringing about the

²⁸ James Nendza, "Political Idealism in More's 'Utopia,'" *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 429, Jstor.

greatest human potential and dignity.²⁹ According to Erasmus, education is the means by which children can be taught to live a virtuous life.³⁰ More displays this form of education clearly in his *Utopia*. For the Utopians, education was a lifelong pursuit, and all citizens had a love for learning.³¹ The Utopian education system resulted in a society that found the greatest pleasure in the practice of virtue. The Utopian society embodies the goals of Erasmian Humanism. It is the penultimate example of what Erasmian Humanists believed a good moral education could do for society. More creates this world in which a good moral education is provided to every citizen at a young age, and yet this society still has its flaws and is incapable of being perfect.

Although More's *Utopia* is a work of Erasmian Humanism, More does something unique with his work. *Utopia* is a society that shares the values of Erasmian Humanism, and executes those values perfectly, and yet still falls short of perfection. Because of this, one could argue *Utopia* can't truly be a work of Erasmian Humanism. However, this contrast was exactly More's intention. More intended to create a world in which education acted as a

²⁹ John M. Parrish, "Erasmian Humanism and More's 'Utopia,'" *Oxford Review of Education* 36, no. 5 (October 2010): 592, Jstor.

³⁰ Parrish, 596.

³¹ Parrish, 598.

great tool for the advancement of society, but also intended to show that a perfect society was impossible. More uses satire to make this point. This literary device was not unique to humanistic work. In fact, Erasmus did this six years before him in his book, *In Praise of Folly*. In this book, Erasmus writes from the perspective of the deity Folly, praising her for all that she does. He is not actually praising Folly but rather, he is using satire to make his point about the foolishness of men. This practice of using satire was not an oddity to Erasmus and More. In a letter Erasmus wrote to More before beginning his book, Erasmus told More he was writing *In Praise of Folly* as an exercise of wit.³² More's use of satire was not an unusual tactic for humanistic writing and shows how *Utopia* fits right alongside other humanistic works.

Utopia is a masterpiece of humanistic literature, in which Thomas More uses satire to praise the humanistic elements while simultaneously critiquing the idea of a perfect society. While many interpretations of *Utopia* tend to either view it as a real work of Utopian literature, or as complete satire, it is much more likely that it falls somewhere in the middle. More's use of satire is not unlike other humanistic works, and through it he creates a work that

³² Desiderius Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*, trans. John Wilson, 1913, 1.

promotes the ideals of Erasmian Humanism, while acknowledging the false hope of a perfect utopian society.

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