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Thesis Proposal

In Search of "No Place": Exploring the Paradoxical Dimensions of Thomas More's *Utopia*

The expression "utopia" has come to mean a place of ideal perfection in all aspects of law, government, and social practice. Thomas More coined this term in 1516 from the Greek *ou* ("no") and *topos* ("place") for the title of his work, *Utopia*. While utopian works are regularly appreciated for their obvious imaginativeness, More's *Utopia* is infinitely more than the inventive description of an "ideal" society. It is, rather, a complex and multifaceted work that draws from both the classical conventions of rhetorical discourse and satiric fiction, resulting in an open-ended text wherein the writer's intent is deliberately elusive, hidden in various layers of meaning, irony, ambiguity, and apparent contradiction. For instance, More's "no place" can also be translated as "good" or "happy place" by combining the Greek *eu* with *topos*. Such characteristics make recognizing *Utopia's* strategies and purposes a challenging task.

My thesis will examine how *Utopia* manages to function rhetorically as a work of social satire and serious theory. I will situate my analysis in response to previous scholarship that has primarily identified *Utopia* in terms of one or the other of these two perspectives. In fact, *Utopia* resists explicit classification because it refuses to offer only one plausible or competent reading. Thus my thesis will also explore how the relationship between these two seemingly incongruous discourse conventions becomes essential when considering the scope of More's accomplishment.

A central question that emerges when reading *Utopia* is: to what extent is Utopia truly intended to be seen as a model of the ideal commonwealth. As David Sacks recalls: "More explicitly identified his book as a study of 'the best state of a commonwealth,' placing it in a long tradition of debate regarding the strengths and

shortcomings of various ideal and real polities" (8). More's introduction of *Utopia* as an account of the ideal commonwealth associates his text with such classical works of political theory as Plato's *Republic* and *The Laws*. However, More's Utopia is "ideal" in large part because it exists in abstraction. It is an archetypal conception wherein its creator has prescribed the actions and procedures of an entire nation. In some respects, Utopia resembles the "ideal" as a function of its proximity to the condemnatory evaluation of English society presented by Hythlodaeus in Book I. Utopia emerges in Book II as an inverted England wherein virtually all policies and practices directly oppose those of More's contemporary society. Furthermore, we are precluded from viewing *Utopia* strictly in terms of political theory, since More is careful to insert those ambiguities and ironic elements reminiscent of classical satire. Although Hythlodaeus (which incidentally means "speaker of nonsense") upholds the Utopian society as exemplary, we are able to recognize *Utopia* as satire because More also includes elements of humor and irony. With both of these discourse conventions evident, the question becomes: is there a way to read *Utopia* and effectively come to any conclusion regarding More's intent?

My first step will be to consider the humanist philosophy that influenced the production of *Utopia*. More's work was informed by the prevailing attitudes of the scholarly circle he participated in, which included such prominent humanists as Desiderius Erasmus, John Colet, and Peter Giles. This intellectual community was profoundly interested in political, social, and religious reform. While More's illustrious political career and religious orthodoxy tend to privilege a more serious reading of *Utopia*, More's Humanist affiliation enables us to recognize the achievement of his work as a fictional narrative that provides perceptive commentary in spite of the apparent contradictions between the policies and practices of the Utopians and More's own religious and political ideology.

Secondly, I will discuss the correlation between *Utopia* and classical works of philosophical discourse in order establish how it has identified *Utopia* as a text concerned primarily with social/political theory. According to George Logan, these classical associations "have served to establish fundamental guidelines for the interpretation of the work as a whole, by proving beyond any reasonable doubt that *Utopia* is a careful and essentially serious work, and that its primary disciplinary affiliation is with the tradition of political theory" (9). However, while the affiliation of *Utopia* with the conventions of classical rhetorical discourse is a salient feature, my discussion of this aspect of the work will be tempered by the important qualification that these connections can provide only a partial view of the overall significance of More's work. Furthermore, they tend to raise more questions than they answer. Though More's work has social and political theoretical implications, it is a work of fiction that is far from functioning solely on the level of a philosophical or political dissertation.

Finally, my investigation will explore More's fascination with the classical satirist Lucian, and his appropriation of Menippean satiric structure in *Utopia*. Further, I will examine More's subtle use of irony, humor, and contradiction and discuss how these conventions affect the reader's ability to discern the work's central argument. For instance, R. Bracht Branham pays particular attention to the satiric structure of *Utopia* and discusses how this structure "continually unsettles the reader's sense of the emerging significance of the text by weaving unpredictably between highly serious and pointedly ludicrous or ironic material" (31). In fact, *Utopia* can be viewed as social satire because it relies on irony to comment upon and challenge the ridiculousness and absurdity of traditional systems of social and cultural practice. Unfortunately, More's use of irony, in conjunction with the conventions of classical rhetorical discourse, serves to further mystify rather than clarify his intent.

Chapter One will introduce my topic and historically situate the text and its writer within the larger sphere of Renaissance humanist thought. Chapter Two will explore the philosophic/rhetorical dimensions of *Utopia* by examining the correlation between this text and various classical works of social and political theory. Chapter Three will consider the connections between *Utopia* and the conventions of Menippean satire. Chapter Four will rely on textual analysis and the previous interpretive perspectives in order to discuss how the consideration of the complex relationship between these two discourse conventions, simultaneously evident in *Utopia*, might offer new ways to distinguish More's rhetorical intent and further appreciate the scale of his accomplishment.

Selected Annotated Bibliography

Blanchard, W. Scott. Scholars' Bedlam: Menippean Satire in the Renaissance. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1995. This book offers an in-depth discussion of Menippean satire and the revitalization it experienced during the Renaissance. This form of satire is named after the Greek Cynic Menippus and is known for its seriocomic style and mixing of humor and irony and verse and prose with philosophical themes. This style of satire proved a very useful mode of expression for the humanist scholar as it was "first and foremost intellectual satire practiced by an intellectual elite upon itself," and its successful presentation depended on a thorough acquaintance with canonical works and classical literary forms (37).

Berger, Harry, Jr. "Utopian Folly: Erasmus and More on the Perils of Misanthropy." English Literary Renaissance. 12.3 (1982): 271-290. Berger compares More's Hythloday to the classic character of Anaxagoras found in the Platonic dialogues, a character that despises human nature and political/public engagement and idealizes a society of "tractable, obedient, mindless, reverent, sincere citizens" (273). However, Hythloday's account of Utopian life demonstrates their distrust or "hatred of life" (290). A closer examination of Utopian practices reveals that the institutionally regulated family structure is a result of their distrust of the affective quality of *philia*. Likewise, their hedonist view of pleasure is destabilized by their rigid taxonomy of pleasurable sensations, which serves to implicitly influence the Utopians to view lower-ranked "pleasures" with disgust and disdain.

Branham, R. Bracht. "Utopian Laughter: Lucian and Thomas More." Moreana. 86 (1985): 23-43. This article discusses the influence of the classical sophist and rhetorician Lucian on More's intellectual development, and More's consequent appropriation of "Lucianic" technique in his own work *Utopia*. The fascination with Lucian was ostensibly the result of More's and Erasmus's decision to translate his works from the Greek into Latin in 1505. Further, this article examines the features of More's work that appear "Lucianic" (elements of humor and irony and the presence of the *eiron* and *alazon* characters) and discusses how they function to create the satiric or "seriocomic" structure in *Utopia*.

Erasmus, Desiderius. The Praise of Folly and Other Writings. Trans. & Ed. Robert M. Adams. New York: Norton, 1989. Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* is one of the most common texts mentioned alongside More's *Utopia* as a quintessential work

of Renaissance humanism. Like *Utopia*, *The Praise of Folly* demonstrates Lucianic techniques in its satiric examination of pedantic theologians, philosophers, and corrupt friars, among others. The Latin name of this work is a pun on More's name; thus *Moriae Encomium* is also translated "in praise of More." Erasmus's tribute to More demonstrates the nature of the friendship between these two humanist scholars, and the extent to which they influenced each other's work during this stage of their literary careers.

Fox, Alistair. Politics and Literature in the Reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII. New York: Blackwell, 1989. This book discusses one of the most notable characteristics of early Tudor literature: its invariable concern with politics. This led to the production of fictional literary representations as a form of indirect expression about matters of contemporary social and political practice. Thus More's fictional work, *Utopia*, was a form of imaginative "free-play" where he could experiment with comic irony and satiric structure and express the many sides of his self that would have otherwise remained concealed: his personal doubts, tensions, ambivalences, and his intellectual and political aspirations (93-106). According to Fox, More's fictional writing then offers a crucial "window into his mind" (6).

Greenblatt, Stephen. Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980. Greenblatt explores *Utopia* as a work of "self-criticism," as More's expression of and exercise in the prospect "self-cancellation" (54). More's active career in politics and his desire to withdraw and be removed from public life, his vacillation between engagement and detachment, are reflected in the "anamorphic" nature of *Utopia*. As such, *Utopia* itself vacillates between deadly serious social commentary and irony, humor, and theatricality.

Guy, John. Thomas More. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Guy's book is not a regular biography about the life of Thomas More. He begins with the question: "Is there an historical Thomas More?" (ix). Guy examines the gaps that remain in the various conflicting representations and constructed characterizations of this man, about whom, according to Guy, relatively little is known for certain before his service in the court of Henry VIII. In Chapter 5 ("Social Reformer?"), Guy examines the numerous readings and interpretations of More's most famous work *Utopia*.

Hexter, J.H. "*Utopia* and Its Historical Milieu." The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More. Eds. Edward Surtz, S.J. and J.H. Hexter. Vol. 4. New Haven: Yale UP. 1965. xxiii-cxxiv. Hexter examines two main aspects of the work: 1) what important things or experiences were occurring at that point in More's life that enabled the production of *Utopia* and 2) how did his intellectual and ideological position influence the creation of *Utopia* (Hexter refers to this as "furniture of the author's mind at the time [More] wrote the book" (xxiii)). Hexter considers a variety of factors that together make up *Utopia's* historical milieu: the immediate circumstances of More's life, medieval influences, his middle class status, his friendship with Erasmus, his interests in humanism and Christian reform, etc.

Kennedy, William J. Rhetorical Norms in Renaissance Literature. New Haven: Yale UP, 1978. In relation to *Utopia's* "the style of ironic discourse," Kennedy focuses primarily on the dialogic aspect of the work as reminiscent of the dialogues of Lucian and Plato, but then acknowledges how More transcends these classical norms to develop his own stylistic effect through the use of puns, verbal ambiguities, paradoxes, and obscurities (83). Kennedy locates the rhetorical complexity and stylistic effects of *Utopia* in the characterizations of "More" and Hythlodaeus and the exchange that takes place between them. Accordingly, Kennedy's analysis is focused primarily on the ironic structure of Book I.

Kinney, Arthur F. Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth Century England. Amherst: U of Mass P, 1986. In Chapter Two: "*Encomium Sapientiae*: Thomas More and *Utopia*," Kennedy compares More's Hythlodaye with Erasmus's Folly, but then demonstrates how Hythlodaye (and hence *Utopia*) surpasses Erasmus's work in its level of complexity. Hythlodaye does not simply deliver a monologue in praise of wisdom and philosophical contemplation; he is fully engaged in deliberative oratory with the intent to persuade his audience with his account of the ideal commonwealth. Hythlodaye's disputation enables More's fiction to function on a whole other level of satire and subtle irony that was not likewise available to Erasmus.

Kirk, Eugene P. Menippean Satire: An Annotated Catalogue of Texts and Criticism. New York: Garland, 1980. An in-depth discussion of Menippean satire. This form of satire was known for its permissive organizational style and its literary structure as a medley of prose, verse, flagrant digression, dialogues, and orations all

mixed together. In theme, Menippean satire was concerned with "right learning or right belief" and often ridiculed, caricatured, and parodied incompetent religious, political, or intellectual institutions/authorities (xi).

Leslie, Marina. Renaissance Utopias and the Problem of History. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998. Leslie argues that utopian fiction coming out of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is best recognized as "a critical practice investigating the historical subject in the interrogative mode" (8). According to Leslie, the historical crisis that is represented in literary utopias is a "crisis of representation." Furthermore, utopian fiction is only effective if it can demonstrate how history is constructed, constituted, and "fictionalized." Leslie critiques Stephen Greenblatt's new historicist analysis and Fredrich Jameson's Marxist reading of More's *Utopia*, claiming that such critics have considered this literary utopia as a paradigm for "reading historically" (10).

Levine, Joseph M. The Autonomy of History: Truth and Method from Erasmus to Gibbon. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999. Chapter One, "Thomas More and the Idea of History," considers More's preoccupation with "the distinction between history and fiction." Levine points out that the "realism" of More's *Utopia* stems from its presentation as a history (its inclusion of real life persons, its structure as a travel narrative, and the humanist correspondence that accompanies "More's" account of his conversation with Hythlodaeus). Yet *Utopia* deliberately presents itself as a fictional work, thereby incorporating the classical notion of fiction as a more effective means than history for teaching ethical and moral principles and for presenting models and descriptions of an ideal.

Logan, George. "*Utopia* and Deliberative Rhetoric." Moreana. 31 (1994): 103-120. This article views More's work as a composition influenced by classical rhetorical theory and discusses the role of the trivium in Renaissance humanist scholarship. Logan focuses on the structure of *Utopia* as demonstrating the three steps of classical oratory: *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* and considers the dialogue between "More" and Hythlodaeus as following the rhetorical conventions displayed in the works of Plato, Cicero, and Quintilian.

---. The Meaning of More's *Utopia*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983. A book-length study of *Utopia*, wherein Logan views More's text as "a serious work of political philosophy" as it presents a methodology of classical Greek theory (using both Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical theory) (ix). According to Logan, the

failure to determine More's intentions in *Utopia* result from the methods of criticism and interpretation that remove parts of the text from of its relevant contexts: out of the context of Renaissance humanism, and out of the context of political theory (x). Thus, in the attempt to recontextualize *Utopia* within the "history of political thought," Logan addresses each section of *Utopia* separately in the order they are presented.

Lucian. The Works of Lucian of Samosata. Trans. H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler. Vol. 1 & 4. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1949. 4 vols. Lucian was a rhetorician and satirist who lived from approximately 125 to 200 AD. A number of his dialogues are mentioned in comparison to the satiric structure of More's *Utopia*, namely, *Menippus*, a "travel" dialogue detailing Menippus's voyage to Hades in search of "a plain reliable map of life," which eventually leads him to Tiresias (158). Lucian's dialogue, *The Cynic*, a conversation between a Greek cynic and the curious student Lycinus, is often used to characterize exchange between Hythlodaeus and "More" in *Utopia*.

More, Sir Thomas. Utopia. Ed. David Harris Sacks. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. This work, originally published in Latin in 1516, presents the account of Hythlodaeus, as told to the narrator "Thomas More," of the "ideal" commonwealth. The Bedford edition of *Utopia* uses the 1556 Robynson translation (with modernized spelling and punctuation). I have elected to use this edition as my primary text (as opposed to the 1965 Yale edition) as it preserves the language and style of the early modern period.

Plato. Complete Works. Eds. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. Plato's *The Republic*, written in approximately 390 BC, is widely considered the classical model for More's *Utopia*. In Books II-V, Socrates offers a paradigm of the ideal good city ruled by philosopher-kings rather than politicians. Plato's dialogue, *The Laws*, is likewise mentioned in relation to *Utopia* as another classical influence. While *The Republic* portrays a communistic ideal (and implicitly, unrealistic) society, *The Laws* presents a legislative framework for a practical colony to be established on the island of Crete.

Reynolds, E.E. Thomas More and Erasmus. New York: Fordham UP, 1965. This book offers a study of the relationship/friendship between Thomas More and Erasmus of Rotterdam and discusses how this friendship influenced each of the other's works, namely More's *Utopia* (1516) and Erasmus's *Moriae Encomium* (1509).

Furthermore, this book follows the movement of both of their careers, and includes excerpts from correspondence between the two friends as well as discussion regarding their interaction with other humanists.

Surtz, Edward, S.J. "Utopia as a Work of Literary Art." The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More. Eds. Edward Surtz, S.J. and J.H. Hexter. Vol. 4. New Haven: Yale UP. 1965. cxxv-clxxx. Surtz's introductory essay examines Utopia as a literary work, paying particular attention to the classical themes and literary structures evident in *Utopia* (noticing its similarities with Plato's discussion of an ideal commonwealth in *The Republic*), its characterization and dramatic technique (comparing it with such works as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*), and its use of irony and comic elements (associating More's work with Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*).

Wegemer, Gerard. "The Rhetoric of Opposition in Thomas More's *Utopia*: Giving Form to Competing Philosophies." Philosophy and Rhetoric. 23 (1990): 288-306. This article focuses on the opposing rhetoric of the characters "More" and Hythlodaeus. According to Wegemer, the conflicting responses and reactions of these two characters is the result of More's use of *prosopopoeia*, a rhetorical device that enables "the realistic presentation of a person which aims at the delineation of character" (288). Wegemer concludes that "More" and Hythlodaeus dramatize two conflicting philosophies: Hythlodaeus represents the "gnostic sophist" while More's character exemplifies the Christian humanist.

Wooden, Warren W. "Anti-Scholastic Satire in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*." Sixteenth Century Journal, 8.2 (1977): 29-45. Wooden expands the view of *Utopia* as intellectual satire, claiming that it not only functions as a general critique directed toward sixteenth century European society, but also on a secondary "level of attack" against the pedantic theologians and scholars that opposed the reformation efforts of the humanists. Wooden's essay examines More's 1515 letter to Martin Van Dorp in defense of Erasmus's *Encomium Moriae* and effectively demonstrates how this correspondence offers crucial insight as to More's intent in *Utopia* by drawing attention to the similarities between the rhetorical strategy in More's letter to Dorp and the satiric structure of Hythloday's dialogue with "More" in *Utopia*.

Yoran, Hanan. “The Humanist Critique of Metaphysics and the Foundation of Political Order.” Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies. 13.2 (2002): 1-19. Yoran claims that, while *Utopia* was “advanced” as a humanist critique of traditional ethics and political ideology, it ultimately fails in its commitment to democracy and liberty because the practices of the Utopians rigorously restrict political participation and free human activity. According to Yoran, the “failure” of *Utopia* is due to its inability to be “grounded in an objective reality outside of itself” (15). Instead, *Utopia* is an expression of political discontent wherein the tensions between the humanist discourse of democracy and freedom and the entrenched religious/moral convictions of the humanists themselves are revealed.