

THOMAS MORE

UTOPIA

Stephanie Spoto

Monterey Peninsula College

GENT 8/408: Late Renaissance and Reformation (1520-1600)

Thomas More, 1478-1535



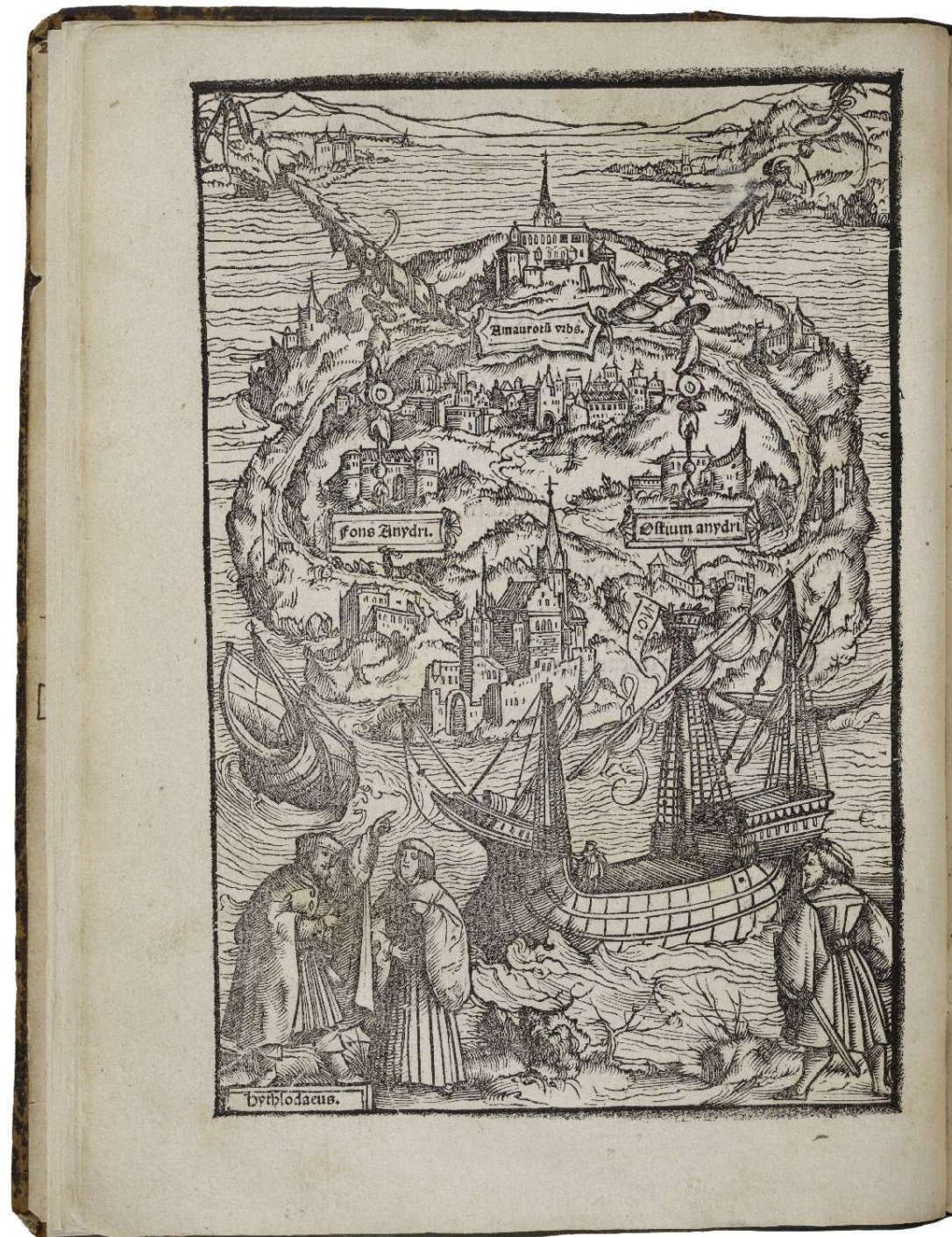
- Lawyer, philosopher, politician/statesman
- Humanist
- Patron saint of politicians
- Born in London, educated in Oxford
 - ▣ Studied classics
 - ▣ Left after two years at father's insistence to study law
- Was interested in monastic life, but remained part of public life and married in 1505
 - ▣ Had four children, including Margaret Roper who was one of the most learned women in the sixteenth century.

Utopia, 1516

- More the first to write a “utopia” → a perfect imaginary world
- Imagines a self-contained island community with a complex, common culture
- **ou-topos**: ‘no place’
- **eu-topos**: ‘good place’
- This pun asks a vital question → at the heart of the narrative and how we should interpret his intentions:

Can a perfect world ever be created?

- For us: should we read this work as a serious political work? Or a satire through which More can comment on the chaos of sixteenth century European politics?



Naming and Fiction

Naming

- Raphael – “God’s healer” in Hebrew
- Hythlodæus – “distributor or peddler of nonsense” in Greek
- Morus – “fool” in Greek
- Utopia – “no place”

Mixing reality with fiction

- More includes real people (Peter Gilles & Hieronymus van Busleyden) who he met on the continent
- Further blurs the line between reality and fiction

Book 1: Dialogue of the Counsel

Correspondences

- Begins with written correspondence between Thomas More and real people he had met: Peter Gilles (town clerk of Antwerp) and Hieronymus van Busleyden (counselor to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V)
- Used letters from actual people to further blur reality and fiction
- Letters also include a specimen of the Utopian alphabet and its poetry.
- Explain the lack of knowledge and travel to Utopia: during the first mention of the land, someone had coughed during announcement of the exact longitude and latitude.
- Introduced to the traveller Raphael Hythlodæus in Antwerp
- Explores the subject of how best to counsel a prince, a popular topic at the time.

Book 1: Dialogue of the Counsel

Critiquing European Politics

- ❑ Discussions with character Raphael about problems with modern European society
- ❑ Example: the tendency of kings to start expensive and wasteful wars
- ❑ Critical of capital punishment for theft → thieves may as well murder their victims to remove witnesses
- ❑ The root causes of crime: the practice of enclosure—the enclosing of common land—people are not allowed to use land for their own sustenance

Book 1: Dialogue the Counsel

Raphael as New Plato

- More claims that Raphael should be a courtier and adviser to kings, but Raphael says he is too radical
- Like Plato, believes that kings should act like philosophers.
Plato doubtless did well foresee, unless kings themselves would apply their minds to the study of philosophy, that else they would never thoroughly allow the council of philosophers, being themselves before, even from their tender age, infected and corrupt with perverse and evil opinions.
- The duty of philosophers is to work within real life and even within flawed systems → rather than starting over
- Raphael leaves Utopia in order to share what he's learned there with Europe

Book 2: Discourse on Utopia

The regulation of life

- Regulated populations: Utopians move to the mainland if it becomes too populated
 - ▣ Implied that Utopians are separate from the indigenous people on the mainland
- No private property, no locks on doors, very little crime
- Everyone must work → mainly in agriculture
 - ▣ Each person must work in agriculture for two years, and then can rotate out to a different occupation
- Slaves: non-Utopians or criminal Utopians (for example, adultery and unauthorized travel are punishable by slavery)
- Religion: all religions are tolerated, except atheism which is shameful

Book 2: Discourse on Utopia

The role of women

- ❑ At first seems to imply equality
→ although the sphere of wives is limited to the household
- ❑ There are a few women priests, and all are martially trained
- ❑ Must confess their sins to their husbands once a month
- ❑ Gambling, make-up, hunting, astrology are all frowned upon
- ❑ Women are sometimes seen as doing the same work as men
- ❑ Perhaps a more liberal society proposed

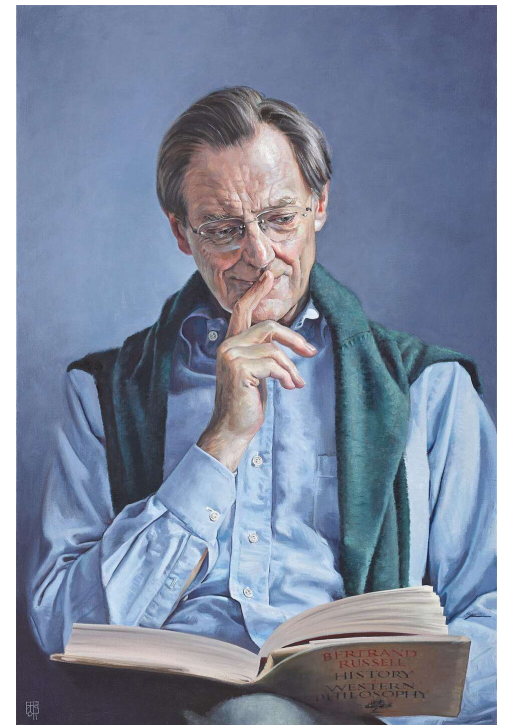


Is *Utopia* a socialist text?

- Rapheal Hythloday praises Utopia, where he has lived for five years → turns out to be a socialist state
- Differing interpretations: are we meant to see this as a support of socialism? Or that it is impractical?
- Could it work?
 - ▣ Individual towns and cities are run by elected princes
 - ▣ Families are up to 16 adults living in a single household
- In his other writings More is inconsistent in his stance on socialism
 - ▣ Hythloday believes the society is perfect and ideal → could be a parody of a fanatic or radical reformer
 - ▣ More “arrives” in Utopia and says it’s ideal and perfect → but must consider the title of the book

Quentin Skinner on *Utopia*

- A very influential interpretation might be a socialist one, comes from Quentin Skinner (b. 1940)
- Core of More's argument is based on the idea of true nobility
- More wanted to argue that private property impeded the possibility of a perfect commonwealth
- Sees Raphael Hythlodæus as embodying Plato's view that philosophers should not get involved in politics
- More embodies the more pragmatic Ciceronian view
- The ideal is a world without private property, but since that was impossible, it is better to take a more pragmatic view



More on trial and execution

- ❑ More refuses to involve himself in the annulment or the second marriage
- ❑ Later, when Henry wants to declare himself head of the church, More declines support
- ❑ At the trial, More refuses to express any opinion
- ❑ The court interprets More's refusal as disagreement of the Act which declares himself head of church: "silence gives consent" (*qui tacet consentire videtur*)



Legal Argument

- Jury convicts More under order from Cromwell
- As judges are about to pronounce sentence of death, More interrupts → prisoners are allowed to be asked before sentencing if they have anything to say
- Last legal defense:
 - ▣ Calls Parliament's Act of Supremacy disgusting to all legal precedent and Christian institution
 - ▣ Cite scripture as the foundation for the Petrine Primacy and authority of Papacy over the Church → not national governments
 - ▣ Magna Carta guarantees Church's freedom from state control
 - ▣ King's own coronation oath.

