

# THOMAS MORE

# UTOPIA

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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

## Mixing reality with fiction

- Begins with Thomas More’s correspondence with several people he had met on the continent: Peter Gilles (town clerk of Antwerp) and Hieronymus van Busleyden (counselor to Charles V)
- More chose these letters, which are communications between actual people.
- Further blurs the line between reality and fiction



# Book 1: Dialogue of the Counsel

## *Fiction and Reality*

VTOPIENSIVM ALPHABETVM.

a b c d e f g h i k l m n o p q r s t v x y  
ó é ð ç ö ø ù ú û ü å æ ç è é ê ë

**Tetraftichon vernacula Vtopiensium lingua.**

Vtupos                    ha                    Boccas                    petu                    la  
 ΘΗΛΓΛΕCΘ    ΘΛΦΘΘΒ    ΓΓΕΙΞΘ  
 chama                    polta                    chamaaan  
 ΦΘΔΘ · ΓΛΞΠΘ    ΦΘΔΘΘ.]  
 Bargol                    he                    maglomi                    baccan  
 ΘΘΠCΛΞ    CΘ    ΔΘCΞΛCΘ    ΘΘΦΘC]  
 foma                    gymno                    fophaon  
 ΘΛΔΘ    CΠΔ]Λ    ΒΛΓCΘΛ]  
 Agrama                    gymnosophon                    labarembacha  
 CΠCΘCΘ · CΠΔ]ΒΛΓΛ] · CΘΔCΓCΔCΘCΘC  
 bodamilomin

Voluala      barchin      herman      la  
Iauoluola      dramme      pagloni.

Horum versuum ad verbum hæc est sententia.

Vtopus meduxcxnon infula fecit infulam  
Vna ego terrarum omnium absq; philosophia  
Ciuitatem philosophicam expresi mortalibus  
Libet̃er impartio mea. nō grauatur accipio meliora.

- Introduces the traveler Raphael Hythlodæus, whom More meets while in Antwerp
- Popular subject at the time: how to counsel a prince
- Similar to the naming and including real people, these letters contain a specimen of Utopian poetry and the Utopian alphabet

# Book 1: Dialogue of the Counsel

## *Critiquing European Politics*



Before talking about Utopia in detail, More and Raphael discuss the current state of European politics.

- ▣ Tendency of kings to start wars
- ▣ Loss of money
- ▣ Criticizes the punishment of execution for theft → thieves might as well murder their witnesses if the punishment is the same
- ▣ Enclosures of the common land causes poverty and starvation → leads to theft





Io. Clemens. Hythlodæus. Tho. Morus. Pet. Aegid.

Conversation between Hythlodæus, Morus and Petrus Aegidius in Antwerp; three male figures seated on r, a city on l, landscape background. Illustration used on p. 25 of Thomas More, 'De optimo reip. statu deque nova insula Utopia...', Basel: J. Froben, March 1518. Woodcut and letterpress.

# Book 1: Dialogue the Counsel

## *Raphael as New Plato*

- More pushes Raphael to get a position as advisor in a royal court → Raphael responds that he's too radical.
- Raphael sees himself in the tradition of Plato: goods rulers should be philosophers. However:

**“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.”**

- More muses about practical philosophy – working in flawed systems to make them better or to start from the beginning (reform or revolution?).
- After living there for five years, Raphael leaves Utopia in order to share what he's learned there with Europe



# Book 2: Discourse on Utopia

## *The regulation of life*

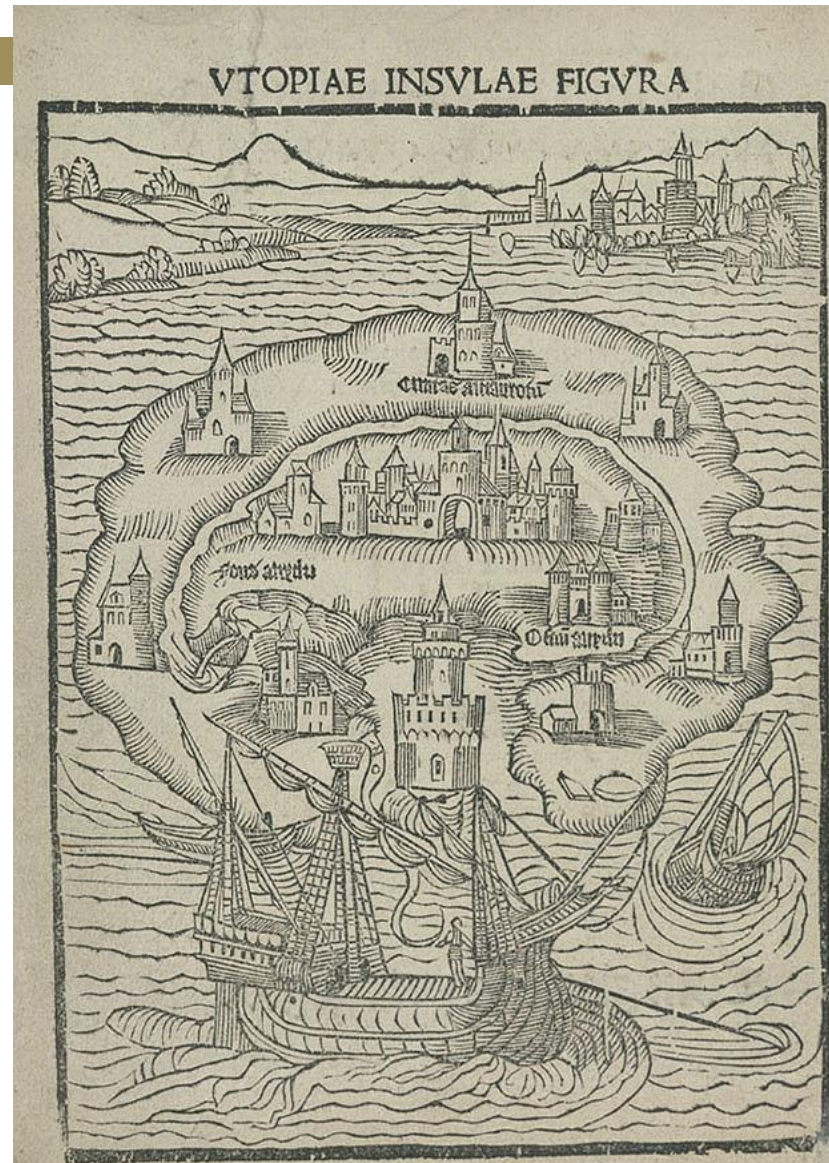


- Regulated populations: Utopians move to the mainland if it becomes too populated
  - ▣ Implied that Utopians are separate from the indigenous people on the mainland
- No private property, no locks on doors, very little crime
- Everyone must work → mainly in agriculture
  - ▣ Each person much work in 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*

- In *Utopia*, women do the same work as men
- Though there seems to be more equality (wives and husbands are subject to each other), there is division of some labor → women are more often restricted to domestic work.
- Priesthood: some widows may become priests
- Wives must confess their sins to their husbands every month
- The role allocated to women in Utopia might, however, have been seen as being more liberal from a contemporary point of view.

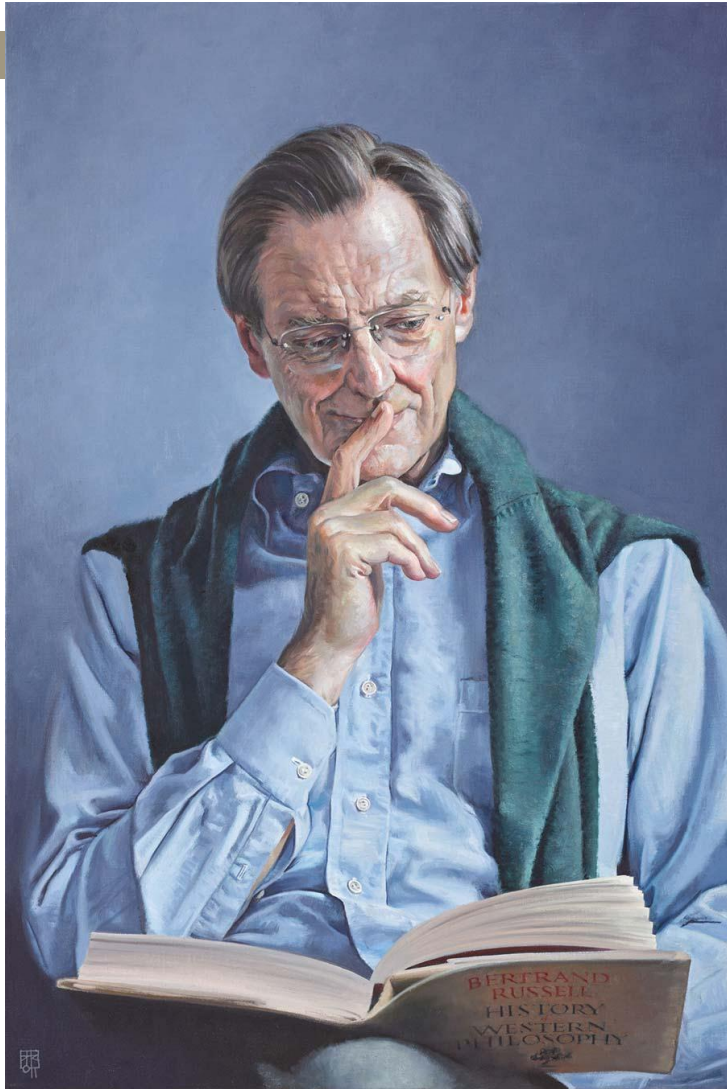




# Is *Utopia* a socialist text?

- Utopia is a kind of socialist state, with no private property, no elevation of riches, and shared work.
- While some scholars see More as supporting socialism, others see him as demonstrating how impractical it is.
- Socialist text?: More wanted to show how socialism could work in practice. He lays out the workings of the cities.
- In his other works, mentions of socialism sometimes seem supported and sometimes are scathing satires.
- Raphael may be used to represent radical reformist of the day: he represents everything in idealized way → perfection.
- It may be More's ideal society → but the book's title ("Nowhere") might be a way to describe Utopia as impractical.

# Quentin Skinner on *Utopia*



- ❑ Skinner: intellectual historian (b. 1940)
- ❑ Argues that More was exploring true nobility in the Renaissance humanist debate
- ❑ Perfect nation could not occur with private property.
- ❑ Raphael (Platonic view): philosophers should not get involved in politics.
- ❑ More (Ciceronian view): more pragmatic.
- ❑ Skinner: Raphael proposes a society that More desires → needs communism → More saw no possibility of communism
- ❑ Therefore, we need to take a more pragmatic approach

DAVID COBLEY 'PROFESSOR QUENTIN SKINNER'



# Thomas More's execution

Many of the practices of the Utopians went against More's beliefs (marriage, euthanasia, marriage for priests, women priests)

More devout Catholic

Opposed the Reformation and the separation of Henry VIII from the Catholic Church

Refused to acknowledge Henry VIII as head of the church → refused to recognize his annulment from Catherine of Aragon

Refused to take the Oath of Supremacy → convicted of treason and executed.

Of his execution, he was reported to have said: "I die the King's good servant, and God's first".



Antoine Caron. *The Arrest and Supplication of Sir Thomas More*. 16th-c.