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Hans Holbein, *Sir Thomas More*, 1527

# Thomas More

## UTOPIA

First edition, Louvain, Flanders, 1516, in Latin  
First edition in English, 1551, by Ralph Robynson,  
with the subtitle:

**A fruitful, pleasant, and witty work,  
of the best state of a public weal and  
of the new isle called Utopia . . .**

Excerpts

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**A meter of four verses in the Utopian tongue,  
briefly touching as well the strange beginning,  
as also the happy and wealthy continuance, of  
the same commonwealth.**

*Utopos ha Boccas peula chama polta chamaan.  
Bargol he maglomi Baccan soma gymnosophaon,  
Agrama gymnosophon labarem bacha bodamilomin.  
Volvala barchin heman la lavolvala dramme pagloni.*

**Which verses the translator, according to his  
simple knowledge and mean understanding in  
the Utopian tongue hath thus rudely Englished.**

**M**y king and conquerer Utopus by name,  
A prince of much renown and immortal fame,  
Hath made me an isle that erst no island was,  
Full fraught with worldly wealth,  
    with pleasure and solace.  
I one of all other without philosophy  
Have shaped for man a philosophical city.  
As mine I am nothing dangerous to impart,  
So better to receive I am ready with all my heart.

**Cornelius Graphey<sup>1</sup> to the Reader**

**W**ilt thou know what wonders strange  
    be in the land that late was found?  
Wilt thou learn thy life to lead by divers  
    ways that godly be?  
Wilt thou of virtue and of vice understand  
    the very ground?  
Wilt thou see this wretched world,  
    how full it is of vanity?  
Then read and mark and bear in mind,  
    for thy behoof, as thou may best.  
All things that in this present work  
    that worthy clerk Sir Thomas More,  
With wit divine full learnedly,  
    unto the world hath plain expressed,  
In whom London well glory may,  
    for wisdom and for godly lore.

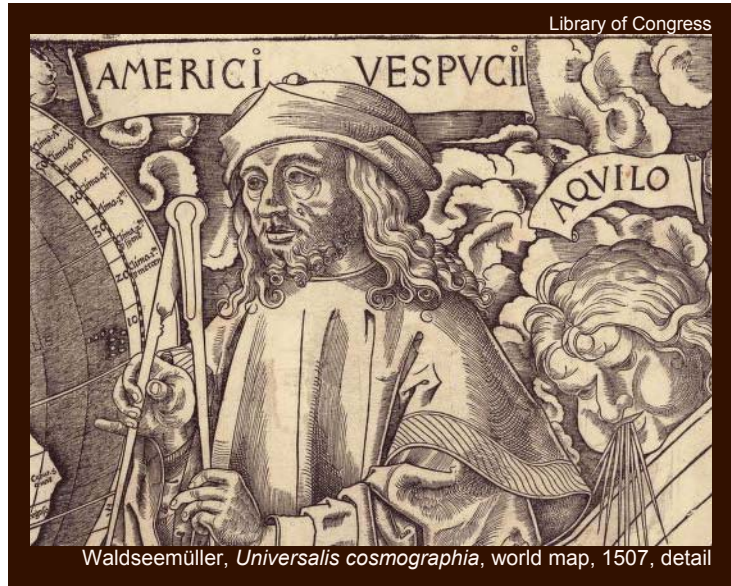
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<sup>1</sup> Graphey: a poet and colleague of Peter Giles in Antwerp, Flanders (now Belgium). Peter Giles, a friend of More's who contributed to the publication of *Utopia*, created a Utopian language and alphabet for the fictional civilization.

While visiting Flanders in 1515, Thomas More meets his friend Peter Giles who introduces him to the (fictional) seaman Raphael Hythloday.

As soon as Peter saw me, he came and saluted me; and as I was returning his civility, he took me aside and pointing to him with whom he had been discoursing, he said: "Do you see you that man? I was just thinking to bring him to you." I answered, "He should have been very welcome on your account." "And on his own too," replied he, "if you knew the man, for there is none alive that can give so copious an account of unknown nations and countries as he can do; which I know you very much desire."

Then said I, "I did not guess amiss, for at first sight I took him for a seaman." "But you are much mistaken," said he, "for he has not sailed as a seaman, but as a traveller, or rather a philosopher. . . He is a Portuguese by birth, and was so desirous of seeing the world that he divided his estate among his brothers, ran the same hazard as Americus Vespuceus, and bore a share in three of his four voyages, that are not published; only he did not return with him in his last, but obtained leave of him almost by force, that he might be one of those twenty-four who were left at the farthest place at which they touched, in their last voyage to New Castile [New Spain] . . . [A]fter he, with five Castilians, had travelled over many countries, at last, by strange goodfortune, he got to Ceylon, and from thence to Calicat, where he very happily found some Portuguese ships, and, beyond all men's expectations, returned to his native country."



After Hythloday reviews the faults of English society, he describes the ideal society of the Utopians.

The island of Utopia is in the middle two hundred miles broad, and holds almost at the same breadth over a great part of it; but it grows narrower toward both ends. Its figure is not unlike a crescent: between its horns, the sea comes in eleven miles broad, and spreads itself into a great bay, which is environed with land to the compass of about five hundred miles, and is well secured from winds. . . Utopus that conquered it (whose name it still carries, for Abraxa was its first name) brought the rude and uncivilized inhabitants into such a good government, and to that measure of politeness, that they now far excel all the rest of mankind. . . .

There are fifty-four cities in the island, all large and well built: the manners, customs, and laws of which are the same, and they are all contrived as near in the same manner as the ground on which they stand will allow. The nearest lie at least twenty-four miles distance from one another, and the most remote are not so far distant but that a man can go on foot in one day from it to that which lies next it. Every city sends three of its wisest Senators once a year to Amarot, to consult about their common concerns; for that is the chief town of the island, being situated near the centre of it, so that it is the most convenient place for their assemblies. . . .

. . . Their records, that contain the history of their town and State, are preserved with an exact care, and run backward 1,760 years. From these it appears that their houses were at first low and mean, like cottages, made of any sort of timber, and were built with mud walls and thatched with straw. But now their houses are three stories high: the fronts of them are faced with stone, plastering, or brick; and between the facings of their walls they throw in their rubbish. . . .

[If] any city should become either too great, or by any accident be dispeopled, provision is made that none of their cities may contain above 6,000 families, besides those of the country round it. No family may have less than ten and more than sixteen persons in it; but there can be no determined number for the children under

age. This rule is easily observed, by removing some of the children of a more fruitful couple to any other family that does not abound so much in them.

By the same rule, they supply cities that do not increase so fast, from others that breed faster; and if there is any increase over the whole island, then they draw out a number of their citizens out of the several towns, and send them over to the neighboring continent; where, if they find that the inhabitants have more soil than they can well cultivate, they fix a colony, taking the inhabitants into their society, if they are willing to live with them; and where they do that of their own accord, they quickly enter into their method of life, and conform to their rules, and this proves a happiness to both nations; for according to their constitution, such care is taken of the soil that it becomes fruitful enough for both, though it might be otherwise too narrow and barren for any one of them. But if the natives refuse to conform themselves to their laws, they drive them out of those bounds which they mark out for themselves, and use force if they resist. For they account it a very just cause of war, for a nation to hinder others from possessing a part of that soil of which they make no use, but which is suffered to lie idle and uncultivated; since every man has by the law of nature a right to such a waste portion of the earth as is necessary for his subsistence. If an accident has so lessened the number of the inhabitants of any of their towns that it cannot be made up from the other towns of the island, without diminishing them too much, which is said to have fallen out but twice since they were first a people, when great numbers were carried off by the plague, the loss is then supplied by recalling as many as are wanted from their colonies; for they will abandon these, rather than suffer the towns in the island to sink too low. . . .

Thus you see that there are no idle persons among them, nor pretences of excusing any from labor. There are no taverns, no alehouses nor stews among them; nor any other occasions of corrupting each other, of getting into corners, or forming themselves into parties: all men live in full view, so that all are obliged, both to perform their ordinary tasks, and to employ themselves well in their spare hours. And it is certain that a people thus ordered must live in great abundance of all things; and these being equally distributed among them, no man can want, or be obliged to beg. . . .

They think it is an evidence of true wisdom for a man to pursue his own advantages as far as the laws allow it. They account it piety to prefer the public good to one's private concerns; but they think it unjust for a man to seek for pleasure by snatching another man's pleasures from him. And on the contrary, they think it a sign of a gentle and good soul, for a man to dispense with his own advantage for the good of others; and that by this means a good man finds as much pleasure one way as he parts with another; for as he may expect the like from others when he may come to need it, so if that should fail him, yet the sense of a good action, and the reflections that he makes on the love and gratitude of those whom he has so obliged, gives the mind more pleasure than the body could have found in that from which it had restrained itself. They are also persuaded that God will make up the loss of those small pleasures, with a vast and endless joy, of which religion easily convinces a good soul.



Isle of Utopia, in 1518 edition of More's *Utopia*