

# Women and feminism in sir thomas more's utopia



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First published in 1516, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* is considered as one of the most influential works of Western humanism. Through the first-person narrative of Raphael Hythloday, More's mysterious traveler, *Utopia* is described as a pagan communist city-state or polis governed by intellect and rationality. By addressing such issues as religious pluralism, women's rights, state-sponsored education, colonialism and justified warfare, the main protagonist seems to be a very recognizable character to many contemporary readers even after more than five centuries while *Utopia* itself remains a foundational text in human philosophy and political ideology through the world. In his description of the religious practices held within More's perfectly structured *Utopia*, Raphael Hythloday informs the reader that "Women are not debarred from the priesthood, but only a widow of advanced years is ever chosen, and it doesn't happen often" (*Utopia* 78). Examples of this rather discriminatory, symbolic remark can be found throughout the text of *Utopia* which is embedded with many inconsistencies and conflicts related to philosophy. At the conclusion of *Utopia* when Hythloday has terminated his extremely detailed narrative of the Utopian polis, Thomas More interjects with "When Raphael had finished. . . it seemed to me that not a few of the customs and laws. . . as existing among the Utopians were quite absurd. Their methods of waging war, their religious ceremonies and their social customs were some of these, but my chief objection was to the basis of their whole system. . . their communal living and. . . moneyless economy" (*Utopia* 84). According to Stephen Greenblatt in his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning From More to Shakespeare*, this "communal living" appears to be the "central motivation" of the entire story (36), yet More's opinion on this condemns it and virtually upsets all the important

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aspects of his Utopian culture. Greenblatt sees this upset as part of the numerous factors underlying More's entire idea of the communal system which views communism as less than "a coherent economic program" and teeming with "selfishness and pride" (37). After analyzing the personal and political views contained in Utopia, recent feminist scholars have deciphered More's application of inconsistencies into a progressive statement regarding gender rights and privileges. Upon citing certain resigned attitudes in Utopia pertaining to women's equality, these scholars have come to the conclusion that women must thoroughly be encouraged to arm themselves, become professional and intellectual and chose their own husbands. Also, More's obvious tolerance for women's rights have influenced the progressive tactics of the feminist in the face of defeating the conservative bias of the modern world. With Hythloday's revelation that "Women are not barred from the priesthood," it becomes clear that two operatives are in action—the maintaining of female/male equalities and the experience of seniority over the innocence of the young, much like William Blake's poetical thesis. According to More, communal living allows for the breakup of many familial obligation roles as shown by Hythloday's statement that "No man is bothered by his wife's querulous complaints about money, no man fears poverty for his son, or struggles to scrape up a dowry for his daughter" (Utopia 82). Through this, all male-female relationships, usually dependent on some sort of financial stability, are reconstructed via utilitarian means. All gender and familial positions are placed on a lower level for the good of every citizen and every contribution made by a member of this society is deemed as being equal to all those made by others which creates a sense of commonality; however, this type of gender indifference creates numerous

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limitations as far as individual freedom is concerned. Women are allowed to work and achieve a certain amount of self-power while at the same time giving up those powers traditionally held as domestic. The power to debate or criticize one's husband for insufficient financial means or to ensure that one's daughter marries into a respectable and stable family are lost in More's ironic Utopia. Most certainly, much of the indifference to gender in the citizens of this polis can be traced to their dislike for private property (land, wealth, jewelry, clothing, etc.) which creates an entire plethora of problems related to the self and familial prosperity. The domestic side of this issue, i. e. physical and emotional activities, becomes completely secretive which enables the women to maintain conditional power. In this Utopian civilization, privacy is transformed into public, as in the wearing of traditional gender clothing or that associated with being married. This brings to mind the ideals of the modern-day Amish or Shakers communities which deplore individualistic displays of gender-related activities and aim to place all citizens in one enormous basket of sameness. In Utopia, the separation of the sexes is greatly implied as exemplified by women being strategically placed on the outside of the dining table " so that if a women has a sudden qualm or pain, such as occasionally happens during pregnancy, she may get up without disturbing the others, and go off to the nurses" (Utopia 43). This situation could easily be considered as a private affair, yet with more discussion on this topic it becomes evident that it is nothing out of the ordinary and serves as another symbol of sameness in this society:" Each child is nurses by its own mother, unless death or illness prevents. When that happens, the wife of the syphogrant quickly finds a suitable nurse. . . Any woman who can gladly volunteers for the job, since all the Utopians applaud

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her kindness, and the child. . . regards the new nurse as it natural mother” (Utopia 43). In a “ normal” society, the act of child nursing is considered as part of a woman’s motherly duties, but in More’s Utopia it is monitored by all members of the community. Utopian marriage customs, where the roles of gender are conventional and subject to change by the mindset of the whole community, are most disturbing, not to mention the punishment which accompanies premarital intercourse, adultery and sexually-related secretive acts. In addition, this so-called Utopian society sees sexual pleasure as an act of utter depravity and any action made by an individual which attempts to deflect from the sameness inherent in all of the citizens is rewarded with disgrace for both the perpetrator and his entire household. The act of displaying one’s nakedness to the brides and grooms prior to marriage in order to discover if “ deformity may lurk under clothing” (Utopia 61) is seen as a preventive step towards men and women seeking forbidden sexual/carnal relationships. Once the marriage is consecrated, a group of elders come together so as to “ forbid a husband to put away his wife against her will for some bodily misfortune” (Utopia 61) with the aim being complete monogamy which derails any sort of secrecy, abandonment or solitude. This it would appear constitutes that privacy is a very illegal act with the outcome being further disgrace for both parties. Another significant aspect of More’s Utopia is how an individual or group intention is just as severely punishable as a specific action against another citizen. Hythloday’s narrative specifies this with “ A man who (tries) to seduce a woman is subject to the same penalties as if he had actually done it. They think that a crime attempted is as bad as one committed, and that failure should not confer advantages on a criminal who did all he could to succeed” (Utopia <https://assignbuster.com/women-and-feminism-in-sir-thomas-mores-utopia/>

62). From a feminist point of view, this "law" where both men and women are equally punished allows women some freedom and power over their own bodies and a relative amount of bodily security. By exposing the neglected area of seduction, a crime such as rape that was traditionally punished after the revelation of the crime, women in More's Utopian ideal gain a degree of protection that deters violence against their bodies and prevents them from being stigmatized or brought under the umbrella of shame. As a consequence, the power of the female bridal bed, courtship and the so-called "feminine mystique" are pushed aside in favor of equal protection "under the law" manifested in this Utopia. It also appears that war and religion in Utopia are viewed as non-domestic areas where power seems to be specifically gendered; women are encouraged to "take up arms" but are not enticed to participate in battles. Yet, as Chris Ferns asserts, "any assertion that women are "liberated" to any degree by participating in battle doesn't take into account the public retribution they suffer, should they refuse, or should they return from the front without their families" (157). This in part brings back the public sphere of Utopia as to the topic of gender and the prevention of individual privacy. The religion of the Utopians considers it a sacrilege to worship the self and have a conscience which makes it mandatory to have confession through the publication of private thoughts under the constant threat of punishment. Paradoxically, if women refuse to participate in battle either by themselves or with their husbands or choose to remain at home while the fighting rages elsewhere, or if they return from battle without their husbands or other family members, they are publicly ridiculed and shamed. Domestically speaking, this creates for women in More's Utopia the quintessential situation of being "stuck between a rock

and a hard place" where one's actions are both exalted and damned at the same time. Thus, in this fabricated Utopian ideal, the metaphor of communal living that supposedly transforms both the public and private arenas does nothing but wreck havoc on all the institutions associated with this society. The places where women traditionally and exclusively operate are thus governed by the entire community, a situation quite reminiscent of Shirley Jackson's classic short story "The Lottery" where the citizens of a small town annually gather together to choose who lives and who dies based on the drawing of a lottery from a little "black box." Yet the self and the individual is not entirely wiped out in Utopia, for communal living encourages the whole to operate as one specific unit. The potential of each person, regardless of gender, is altered by physical and intellectual education which prepares him/her for exceptional service in the public sphere. Thomas More's socio-political agenda in Utopia creates a paradigm for feminist based on family interaction, gender-bending, non-wealth and property and bizarre sexually-oriented situations. As the author and creator of Utopia, Thomas More has clearly shown his own personal tolerance and progressive views concerning women's rights and social privileges. His overall view of how to make a better world for men and women to live in has fascinated the minds of thinkers and philosophers in every age. From Plato to the present day, a span of almost two and a half millenniums, men have been thinking and writing about what the world would be like if as a homogenous unity an earthly paradise could be created and maintained. In the dialog of Sir Thomas More, certain objections to the communal idea are present, yet this seems to be the only point on which he appears to have some reservations, but the words of Raphael Hythloday brings forth the answers to his

objections very satisfactorily. In More's Utopian ideal, violence, bloodshed and vice, according to the narrator, have been eliminated. The people of Utopia have chosen instead to labor for recreation's sake in their gardens, improve their homes, attend humanistic lectures, enjoy music and converse profitably with each other; in other words, they have chosen to pursue more profitable enterprises associated with the mind instead of with capitalistic pursuits of wealth and money. The Utopian women, for the most part, live very different lives as compared to that of the typical sixteenth-century English woman who usually lived in absolute poverty and slaved every waking hour simply to subsist. In this society, adultery is regarded as a crime and is punished by slavery. Marriage for love is much encouraged, but also prudence in selecting a mate. The welfare of the family is a state matter since it is the basic unit of the Utopian state. The people are anxious for the commonwealth to be rich, for the Utopians buy off their enemies and use their wealth to hire foreign mercenary soldiers which they hope in this manner will encourage potential enemies to murder one another. The Utopians are described as a religious people who practice toleration almost unknown during More's times in Catholic Tudor England. Some are Christians while others worship God in their own way. Two specific points should be made in connection with More's brilliant yet unsettling Utopia—first, his borrowings from Plato and other Greek writers which prevented him from adding much of his own theories and practices; and second, that in the four and a half centuries since the publication of Utopia, numerous ideas suggested by More have been put into effect in our modern world, such as tolerance for other's viewpoints, equality (generally speaking) amongst the sexes and most important of all the acceptance of the feminist viewpoint on <https://assignbuster.com/women-and-feminism-in-sir-thomas-mores-utopia/>



the world as seen through the eyes of women, the proverbial outsiders who have always been able to understand the faults of current society with objectivity based on logic instead of manipulation. SOURCES CITED Ackroyd, Peter. *The Life of Thomas More*. New York: Anchor Press, 1998. Ferns, Chris. *Narrating Utopia*. Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 1999. Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Marius, Richard. *Thomas More: A Biography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. More, Sir Thomas. *Utopia*. Ed. & Trans. Robert M. Adams. New York: Norton, 1992.