

More is not
hythlodæus: utopia's
early-modern
enterprise of and
experiments with...



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Thomas More's *Utopia* involves circumlocutory ways of distancing the author's self from Hythlodæus's delineation of the exemplary city. More wanted not only to obfuscate his agency as the author, but also lend a unique credibility to the conceptual hypothesis that he sought to fabricate. By endowing his "philosophical city" with the semblance of reality, he caused his readers to see the mechanism in operation by means of a feigned description, which is also the essential feature of the utopian genre (Frye 31). Symptomatic of the renaissance anxiety about the constant entanglement of the ideas of dissidence, privacy, guilt and anti-state practices, More's *Utopia* does not ascribe any private space to its inhabitants. Consequently, "[T]here are . . . no opportunities for seduction, no secret meeting-places . . . [E]veryone has his eye on you, so you're practically forced to get on with your job, and make some proper use of your spare time" (More 65). Ironically, More too is painfully aware of such eyes on himself and as a consequence, the pretence of second-hand reporting can indeed be construed as a protective technique that More avails himself of (Turner xiv). The paradox of this situation can best be identified by locating how More himself paid with his own life for the degree of surveillance that haunted Renaissance England, where even his silence on the issue of Henry VIII assuming the position of supreme head of the Church was treachery enough to be awarded a death sentence. More's *Utopia*, and the Utopian thought in general, have had far-reaching cultural impact in context with the emergence of the modern socio-political conditions of subject formation.

Catholics and communists have both indulged in what Paul Turner calls "a critical tug of love" (xi), in an attempt to valorize their own ideologies by

borrowing More's authority. Such an approach only betrays a partial understanding of the utopian tradition in which the work belongs, precisely because it construes the author's intention as producing, as it were, "a blueprint of the society at which we aim" (Popper 157). As Lyman Sergent pertinently remarks: "few utopias were written with the intent of implementing them in detail, and the history of political thought does not offer blueprints for building new societies" (570). Undoubtedly, utopian literature, when viewed as social or political theory, creates a conflict between an artist's intent and the extent to which he chooses (or maybe, is forced) to showcase himself under the reader's scrutiny. The way More as an author tries to unauthorise his text, can not only deceive some "fathead who said he did not see why More should be so much admired for his Utopia, since all he did was write down what somebody else had told him" (Turner xiv), but also should keep the intelligent reader on guard regarding the "reality" he plays around with. More's success in shaping an almost a proto-postmodern ethos banks partly on his pioneering ability to introduce this element of "play" in his text, the element of ambiguity that locates as well as dislocates reality through the simultaneous interplay of presence and absence. The reader can readily locate the socio-political evils that Hythlodæus talks about, but being unable to contextualize them except as veiled references farther veiled by the interventions of the dramatic persona of the author himself from within the text, he perceives the reality as confused and dislocated.

Utopia's relevance today cannot be appreciated if we try to put it in the straitjackets of either communism or Catholicism, but taken as a

spontaneous overflow of intellectual high spirits, a revel of debate, paradox, comedy and above all of invention which starts many hares but kills none (Rengasamy xxxii), the text remains one fraught with complexities of consciousness resonating with the modern concerns of privacy, family, utility, religion and identity. The appearance and disappearance of frontiers and mushrooming of various ideological boundaries have not stopped in our time, and “ it is precisely at this moment, while new, or very old and frightening, frontiers appear or reappear, those of nationalistic, racial or religious exclusions — precisely at this moment that it is worth recalling the fiction of an island that appeared at the dawn of a period for which our present time would form the twilight” (Marin 11). Furthermore, one can argue that the utilitarianism of the utopians that issues from their notion of mercy and kindness has much in common with what Charles Taylor calls “ modern utilitarianism” as a secularized variant of Christian spirituality (13). The very initiation of Hythlodæus's arguments marks the cruelty and impudence behind capital punishment of thieves prevalent in the then England. Strikingly, his arguments combine compassion with prudence as he tries to demonstrate how widespread poverty should be addressed first instead of punishing the thief who mostly steals out of want and scarcity of basic amenities of life resulting from under-utilization of human labour and natural resources.

More's veiled reformist spiritual zeal comes to us filtered through Hythlodæus's tale of the utilitarianism of the non-Christian Utopians that can be paralleled with the “ thrust of the utilitarian Enlightenment, protesting against the needless, senseless suffering inflicted on humans in the name

of . . . orders" (Taylor 13). Locating and recognizing the individual subject as a product of the social conditions is one major point of thrust in Hythlodæus's argument. As Habermas has noted, More's ideal city shares one major feature of Machiavelli's proposals in *The Prince* (1513) — namely, we must first establish the social conditions wherein the individual subjects may realize their human potential and moral ideals. He says: " virtue and happiness as such are here [in Utopia] conceived in the traditional manner; but what is modern is the thesis that the technically appropriate organization to meet the necessities of life, the correct institutional reproduction of society, is prior to the good life, without these in themselves representing the content and the goal of moral action" (Habermas 54). The process of employing the " correct institutions" in Utopia — which includes abolition of private property, the source of power and privileges through accumulation of wealth — however, signals an opposite hypothesis of *The Prince*, namely, a movement toward the removal (rather than the strengthening) of the social domination of the few over the many (Dupr? 151). By emphasizing the dependence of the individual's actions on the social system that s/he constitutes, Hythlodæus almost anticipates a poststructuralist concern that seeks to contend that subjects are not the autonomous creators of themselves or their social worlds; rather, subjects are embedded in a complex network of social relations (Namaste 221). The specific social and cultural logic — the key to subject formation — leads uncannily to ways in which subjectivities are at once framed and concealed.

We can move onto locating these features at the textual level. More's borrowings from Plato's *Republic* while shaping his Utopia have long been

critically commented on. In addition to the similarities that the two share, also interesting in this context are the ways of More's conscious departure from Plato's ideal. The heteropatriarchal family in utopia is central to its functional *modus operandi*, quite unlike in Plato's republic where marriages are controlled by the government and one woman can be married to many men. Marriage to the Utopians appear to be an individual decision to the extent that the otherwise idiosyncratic practice in which both the man and the woman are allowed to see each other completely naked before agreeing to marry is seen as hardly ridiculous. The attitude of the Utopians to the power dynamics at work within the familial domain seems also to humourously reflect More's own family (Rengasammy xxvi). However crude dictums like "husbands are responsible for punishing their wives" (More 85) or the custom whereby wives are required to kneel down before their husbands every month and ask for forgiveness (without any mention of the same to be done by the husbands too) in order to maintain domestic peace appear, the family is still the coherent unit which elects the syphogrants of the administrative structure. The governors are not elected by popular vote but by these syphogrants elected first by the families. It remains an open question whether every adult member of the family votes or whether the choice is made only, for example, by the head of the family, though perhaps in consultation with other members of the family (Steintrager 363).

Prevention of pre-marital sexual intercourse is given extreme importance by the utopians by putting into effect stringent laws against it. However, instead of defending such laws on grounds of preserving marital sanctity, an almost scandalous argument (especially to Catholics) is presented as defence. It is said that they are particularly strict about these rules "because they think <https://assignbuster.com/more-is-not-hythlodæus-utopias-early-modern-enterprise-of-and-experiments-with-individual-subject-formation/>

very few people would want to get married — which means spending one's whole life with the same person, and putting up with all the inconveniences this involves — if they weren't carefully prevented from having any sexual intercourse otherwise" (More 83-4). This statement takes for granted the intrinsic hedonistic bent of mind of the common man, inclined more to pleasures than principles. The sensual aspect of the human mind is foregrounded by the assumption that going by natural logic, sexual gratification can become preferable to the "inconveniences" of marital companionship.

It is important to note where this logic leads. Their "natural" religion is inextricably linked to "[T]he principles of natural theology ... necessary for the support of morality" (Steintrager 370). As Steintrager notes, Utopian morality is more hedonistic than the morality of the Republic and for the ordinary Utopian, the check on excessive pursuit of pleasure is religion (371). The historical moment at which More was negotiating with Plato's past ideal had much impact on the ideas that he explored in Utopia, if not unambiguously advocated. At a time when privacy was being freely associated with secrecy and seditious thoughts, the essence of Utopian privacy survives only in marital sexuality and the individual's option to choose a partner and even divorce with him/her on mutual consent. Real pleasures, being divided "into two categories, mental and physical," includes "sexual intercourse, or any relief of irritation by rubbing or scratching" (More 76-7). The only limiting factor that defines immorality is simply categorized as "pain," as "pleasure mustn't cause pain — which they think is bound to happen, if the pleasure is immoral" (More 79). What

comes forward as a pervasive principle in such arguments is the immediate corporeality of pain and pleasure of the individual subject as a direct quotient of privately felt sense perceptions that would later become major instruments in purveying knowledge and truth for Montaigne. Though for Descartes and his legacy the thrust shifts on to abstract reason alone, modern times have seen a reclamation of the individual's sensory experience as having as much relevance as abstract reasoning. Such dialectical ways of preserving the privacy of pleasure and banning it when it veers towards "pain" form a key to the formation of the Utopian subject.

More's fictionalized narrator Hythlodæus is also, first and foremost, a traveller, reportedly returning from a voyage in the New World as part of Amerigo Vespucci's expedition; and although he avows to "describe their [Utopians'] life, not defend it" (More 79), he appears particularly anxious in many cases to do exactly that. It is intriguing to conceptualize — when "Hythlodæus means 'dispenser of non-sense,' Utopia means 'not place,' Anydrus (the name of a river) means 'not water,' and Ademus (the title of a chief magistrate) means 'not people'" (Turner xii) — what is the cultural valence of More's ironic take on early-modern travel narratives, and what are its relations to an individual's private agency to imagine and reorder reality through stories of travel and spatial displacement. To quote Louis Marin: "any travel is, first of all, a moment and a space of vacancy, an unencumbered space which suspends continuous time and the ordering loci" (14). The island of Utopia is almost a spatial escape from subjecthood, an exploration that at once hoaxes early-modern travel narratives and uses them as a cover up for filtering out contemporary reality. The flux that lies at

the heart of this early-modern enterprise is one that emblemizes displacement of meaning at multiple levels: “displaced letters, displaced names (displacing their significations) — a displaced map displacing all maps and really finding none — Utopia as process is the figure of all kinds of frontiers, displacing, by the practice of its travels, all representations, secretly duplicating any kind of real geographical voyage and any kind of historical and temporal change” (Marin 16). The ultimate fictive nature of the text exposes the fiction of the self created through travel narratives — which always formed an integral part of the individual subject formation — whenever it sought to claim its selfhood by describing and inventing geographically disparate Others. It is not without a reason that the ideas that Hythlodæus advocates in a half-polemical, half-prophetic voice arguably surpass in conviction anything that More produced elsewhere. More’s diplomatic office as a Renaissance humanist ambassador per excellence situated him in a complex cultural melting pot where his profession was a constant balancing act between stasis and flux, between “private philosophical meditation with public oratory and involvement in the civic world of politics and diplomacy” (Brotton 56), and what he offers in Utopia can be seen more as a rhetorical exploration of an escape route from his own subjectivity and also from the emerging bourgeois ethos, than anything else. As More himself speaks in different voices by introducing real-life characters like John Morton, Peter Gilles, and Thomas More, distorting and displacing their personae, his Utopia too mimics and distorts contemporary developments by practising a ventriloquism of sorts. The Utopians’ subject constitution is premised on the artifice of appropriating multiple stereotyped representations into one composite spatial Other. Just like travel narratives <https://assignbuster.com/more-is-not-hythlodæus-utopias-early-modern-enterprise-of-and-experiments-with-individual-subject-formation/>

built up intertextual metarealities that fostered stereotyped constructions of racial others, Utopian cities too form stereotypes by claiming a uniformity in customs and administrative machinations that is possible only in fiction.

Early-modern constructions of the Self were especially dependent of such cultural others. But Utopia does more than passively participate in myth-making. Utopia exists as a metatext that responds to as much as it reinforces exigencies of early-modern subject constitution. It mimics travel narratives only to self-consciously introduce an imaginative strand in its traditional yarn. Hythlodæus's voice acts here as the escape route for securing More's privacy by being the product of his own creative impulse. It is impossible to fully accept Hythlodæus as More's mouthpiece — although in Utopian language “ he” means “ I” — as More is deliberately ambivalent about his Utopia, not because he could not make up his mind, but because “ politically, he could not be seen to endorse a particular standpoint” (Brotton 56). The seductive power of the humanist rhetoric posits the common man at the centre of the Utopian “ commonwealth” without being too radical about its position. More keeps it arguable to what extent he himself would embrace a state policy that espouses religious toleration, but the notion of a secular state that he explores is, undoubtedly, very modern in word and spirit.

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