

Sir thomas more and the case of the careful critic



In Sir Thomas More's "Utopia," one may find a fascinating adventure story about the sailor named Raphael Hythloday. However, below the surface of this adventure story lies a deep sea of social criticism. In a time period where speaking against the government was very dangerous, More found a way to express his opinions via the fictional character of Raphael. More is quite loyal to his convictions, while also being very careful not to earn punishment for his would-be seditious societal commentaries. When writing "Utopia," Sir Thomas More must have been thinking about the problems of society and how to combat and correct them. At the same time, he wanted to write his suggestions in a way that would not put him in dire straits with the law. More's first attempt to absolve himself from direct criticism was to write a piece of fiction, not a speech or essay. More creates a narrator in Raphael Hythloday to speak any criticisms or controversial ideas. Sir Thomas even puts himself into the story with Hythloday, participating in dialogues with him, and even asking Raphael the questions that he knew would be asked of him if he spoke such outlandish ideas in public. The first concrete proof of "an escape clause" for Sir Thomas More is the very name of his main character. The surname "Hythloday," when broken down into its Greek roots, is converted to two words: huthlos and daien. Further study of footnote nine on page five of the text provides a definition of the two Greek roots. Huthlos has a translated meaning of "nonsense," while daien has a translated meaning of "to distribute". It is also noted that when the words are brought together, they literally mean "distributor of nonsense" or "peddler of nonsense". This is a quite humorous situation because one could easily imagine a lawman in Renaissance England challenging More about the text of Utopia and the ideas presented by Raphael Hythloday. More could

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save himself by passing it off as simple drollery. He could reply to any charges by saying, “ It was all in fun. Everything Hythloday says is nonsense. His surname translates to ‘ peddler of nonsense,’ don’t you get it? It is comedy.” Throughout the text, More embodies a lawyer’s precision in avoiding self-incrimination. On page nine of the text, More and Hythloday are engaged in a dialogue concerning the common practice of societies considering any new ideas unacceptable and against tradition. Hythloday recalls, “ Now in a court composed of people who envy everyone else and admire only themselves, if a man should suggest something he had read of in other ages or seen in far places, the other counselors would think their reputation for wisdom was endangered, and they would look like simpletons, unless they could find fault with his proposal”(Utopia, p8). Hythloday goes further to explain “...such proud, obstinate, ridiculous judgments I have encountered many times, and once even in England”(Utopia, p9). I thought this was one of the strongest statements of the passage. Perhaps even dangerous for Thomas More to even address the possibility of his beloved England being guilty of closed mindedness. However, More quickly extinguishes any fire underneath him by challenging ideas of Hythloday. “ What! Where you ever in England?”(Utopia, p9). This is another, mildly humorous case of More’s apparent fear of the government and his subsequent attempts to cover his tracks. One other careful criticism is made by More’s alter ego “ Hythloday” when he speaks of a dinner he had in the presence of the Cardinal, a high official of the church. More creates another “ patsy” when Hythloday speaks of a layman that was “...learned in the laws of your country, who for some reason took occasion to praise the rigid execution of justice then being practiced upon thieves”(Utopia, p9). In

footnote two on page nine, it is noted that “ It was unusual at that time for a layman to have legal training; but More, who is going to attribute cruel and stupid opinions to this man, wants to dissociate him from the Church and the Cardinal”(Utopia, p9). Here again, More is careful to clearly point out that the layman in no way represents the views of the Church. Any criticism of the Church of England would surely bring about death. The layman represents a common societal point of view when he challenges Hythloday’s view of the punishments not fitting the crimes. “ There are the trades, and there is farming, by which men may make a living unless they choose deliberately to be rogues”(Utopia, p10). Obviously, Sir Thomas More believes that the society should not be structured around the fear of being executed. His puppet character, Hythloday, goes further to strike down the retort of the layman by saying, “ Oh no, you don’t, you won’t get out of it that way. We may disregard for the moment the cripples who come home from foreign and civil wars, as lately from the Cornish battle and before that from your wars with France. These men, wounded in the service of kind and country, are too badly crippled to follow their old trades, and too old to learn new ones... There are a great many noblemen who live idly like drones, off the labors of others...Lords would rather support idlers than invalids”(Utopia, p10). This serves as another logical criticism of a common practice in renaissance England that Sir Thomas More was obviously offended by. The finale of Utopia is the last example of More’s careful criticism. He speaks of his own thoughts after Hythloday finishes his story of the island of Utopia. He affirmed, “...my chief objection was to the basis of their whole system, that is, their communal living and moneyless economy. This one thing alone takes away all the nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty which (in <https://assignbuster.com/sir-thomas-more-and-the-case-of-the-careful-critic/>

the popular view) are considered the true ornaments of any nation”(Utopia, p84). This is a statement of contradiction because any man who has the ability to identify imperfections in society and also suggest remedies for those imperfections, as More did in the text of Utopia, could not consider nobility, wealth, and majesty as the “ true ornaments” of society. No, More’s character in the text is only saying this to avoid incriminating himself. It is important to recognize that in the parenthesis, More notes that the elements he listed are “ the popular view” of society. Therefore, one could say that he finds a way to stay true to his convictions by letting the readers know that the statement is the public consensus, not necessarily his own. Sir Thomas More must have possessed great vision of a better society in order to portray his ideas so precisely and honestly through the words of Hythloday. Although the time period did not allow him the freedom to criticize, he still found a way to point out unfair practices by the government and immoral executions of the law. More was clever enough to leave himself an escape route by manipulating elements of a fictional story and puppet characters. Utopia is a story that someone had to write. Humanity needed new ideas and fresh critiques of age-old laws and customs. More’s flawless execution of careful criticism in Utopia serves as reminder to the modern era that even passive resistance can bring about change.