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Thomas More
Excerpt
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ON THE BEST
STATE OF A COMMONWEALTH
AND ON THE NEW ISLAND
OF UTOPIA

A Truly Golden Handbook,
No Less Beneficial than Entertaining,
by the Most Distinguished and Eloquent Author
THOMAS MORE
Citizen and Undersheriff of the Famous City
of London

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THOMAS MORE TO PETER GILES,
 GREETINGS¹

My dear Peter Giles, I am almost ashamed to be sending you after nearly a year this little book about the Utopian commonwealth, which I'm sure you expected in less than six weeks.² For, as you were well aware, I faced no problem in finding my materials, and had no reason to ponder the arrangement of them.³ All I had to do was repeat what you and I together heard Raphael⁴ relate. Hence there was no occasion for me to labour over the style, since what he said, being extempore and informal, couldn't be couched in fancy terms.⁵ And besides, as you know, he is a man not so well versed in Latin as in Greek;⁶ so that my language would be nearer the truth, the closer it approached to his casual simplicity. Truth in fact is the only thing at which I should aim and do aim in writing this book.

I confess, my dear Peter, that having all these materials ready to hand left hardly anything at all for me to do. Otherwise, thinking through this topic from the beginning and disposing it in proper order might have demanded no little time and work, even if one were not entirely deficient in talent and learning. And then if the matter had to be set forth with eloquence,

¹ In the first edition of *Utopia* (1516), this letter was called the 'preface' of the work; this is also its running title in the 1518 editions. On Giles (*c.* 1486–1533), see p. 9 and, on his role in the genesis of *Utopia*, pp. 120–1 and the Introduction, p. xvi.

² On the chronology, see Introduction, pp. xvi–xvii. On the meaning of 'Utopia', p. xi.

³ Finding materials, disposing them in the proper order and couching them in the appropriate style are the three steps of literary composition (*inventio, dispositio, elocutio*), as that subject is treated in the classical textbooks of rhetoric and their medieval and Renaissance successors.

⁴ I.e., Raphael Hythloday. His given name links him with the archangel Raphael, traditionally a guide and healer. (On his surname, see p. 5n.)

⁵ Rhetorical theory identified three levels of style: the grand, the middle and the plain. This sentence hints that *Utopia* is written in the plain style – according to theory, the appropriate one for philosophical dialogue. In point of fact, while the account of the Utopian commonwealth in Book II of the work is written in a generally simple and straightforward style, some passages of Book I, as well as the peroration of Book II, diverge very considerably from the plain style. See Clarence H. Miller, 'Style and meaning in *Utopia*: Hythloday's sentences and diction'.

⁶ Knowledge of Greek was still uncommon among humanists in the early sixteenth century and thus carried considerable prestige in their circles. Greek studies had been More's own preoccupation as a scholar in the decade leading up to *Utopia*.

More to Giles

not just factually, there is no way I could have done that, however hard I worked, for however long a time. But now when I was relieved of all these concerns, over which I could have sweated forever, there was nothing for me to do but simply write down what I had heard. Well, little as it was, that task was rendered almost impossible by my many other obligations. Most of my day is given to the law – pleading some cases, hearing others, arbitrating others, and deciding still others. I pay a courtesy call to one man and visit another on business; and so almost all day I'm out dealing with other people, and the rest of the day I give over to my family and household; and then for myself – that is, my studies – there's nothing left.

For when I get home, I have to talk with my wife, chatter with my children, and consult with the servants. All these matters I consider part of my business, since they have to be done unless a man wants to be a stranger in his own house. Besides, you are bound to bear yourself as agreeably as you can towards those whom nature or chance or your own choice has made the companions of your life. But of course you mustn't spoil them with your familiarity, or by overindulgence turn the servants into your masters. And so, amid the concerns I have mentioned, the day, the month, the year slips away.

When do I write, then? Especially since I still have said nothing about sleeping or even eating, to which many people devote as much time as to sleep itself, which consumes almost half of our lives. My own time is only what I steal from sleeping and eating.⁷ It isn't very much (hence the slow pace), but it's something, and so I've finally finished *Utopia*, and I'm sending it to you now. I hope, my dear Peter, that you'll read it over and let me know if you find anything that I've overlooked. Though on this point I do not lack all confidence in myself – I wish my judgement and learning were up to my memory, which isn't too bad – still, I don't feel so confident that I would swear I've missed nothing.

For my servant John Clement⁸ has raised a great doubt in my mind. As you know, he was there with us, for I always want him to be present at conversations where there's profit to be gained. (And one of these days I

⁷ His sixteenth-century biographer Thomas Stapleton says that More slept four or five hours a night, rising at 2 a.m. See *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, trans. Philip E. Hallett, ed. E. E. Reynolds (London, 1966), p. 28. Claiming that a book was composed in odd hours or inopportune circumstances was conventional, but in More's case there is no reason to doubt that the convention corresponded to fact.

⁸ John Clement (d. 1572) was one of the first students of St Paul's School, the humanist grammar school founded by John Colet about 1509. By 1514 he had entered More's household as servant and pupil; in later life he became a respected physician.

More to Giles

expect we'll get a fine crop of learning from this young sprout, who has already made excellent progress in Greek as well as Latin.) Anyhow, as I recall matters, Hythloday⁹ said the bridge over the Anyder at Amaurot was five hundred yards long; but my John says that is two hundred yards too much – that in fact the river is not more than three hundred yards wide there. So I beg you, consult your memory. If your recollection agrees with his, I'll yield and confess myself mistaken. But if you don't recall the point, I'll follow my own memory and keep my present figure. For, as I've taken particular pains to avoid having anything false in the book, so, if anything is in doubt, I'd rather say something untrue than tell a lie. In short, I'd rather be honest than clever.

Note the theological distinction between a deliberate lie and an untruth¹⁰

But the difficulty can easily be cleared up if you'll ask Raphael about it – either face-to-face or else by letter. And you must do this anyway, because of another problem that has cropped up – whether through my fault, or yours, or Raphael's, I'm not sure. For it didn't occur to us to ask, nor to him to say, in what part of the New World Utopia is to be found. I would give a sizeable sum of money to remedy this oversight, for I'm rather ashamed not to know the ocean where this island lies about which I've written so much. Besides, there are various people here, and one in particular, a devout man and a professor of theology, who very much wants to go to Utopia.¹¹ His motive is not by any means idle curiosity, a hankering after new sights, but rather a desire to foster and further the growth of our religion, which has made such a happy start there. To do this properly, he has decided to arrange to be sent there by the pope, and even to be named bishop to the Utopians. He feels no particular scruples about applying for this post, for he considers it a holy ambition, arising not from motives of glory or gain, but from religious zeal.

Office-seeking in a good cause

Therefore I beg you, my dear Peter, to get in touch with Hythloday – in person if you can, or by letters if he's gone – and make sure that my work contains nothing false and omits nothing true. Perhaps it would be

⁹ From Greek *hythlos* ('idle talk', 'nonsense') plus *daein* ('to distribute') or perhaps *daios* (in the rare sense of 'knowing', 'cunning'): hence 'nonsense peddler' or 'expert in nonsense'. Similarly, 'Anyder' and 'Amaurot' are from *anydros*, 'waterless', and *amauroton*, 'made dark or dim'. For the bridge, see p. 45 below.

¹⁰ This distinction has not been located in the theological literature. More's formulation of it echoes a passage in a late classical work well known to humanists, Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights* (xi.xi). The marginal glosses are apparently by Giles, though Erasmus may also have had a hand in them (see p. 121 and note).

¹¹ A note in a 1624 translation of *Utopia* identifies this learned divine as Rowland Phillips, Warden of Merton College, Oxford. But there is nothing to support the identification, and the passage may simply be one of the book's jokes at the expense of theologians.

More to Giles

better to show him the book itself. If I've made a mistake, there's nobody better qualified to correct me; but even he cannot do it, unless he reads over my book. Besides, you will be able to discover in this way whether he's pleased or annoyed that I have written the book. If he has decided to write out his own story himself, he may not want me to do so; and I should be sorry, too, if in publicising the commonwealth of Utopia I had robbed him and his story of the flower of novelty.

But, to tell the truth, I'm still of two minds as to whether I should publish the book at all.¹² For men's tastes are so various, the tempers of some are so severe, their minds so ungrateful, their judgements so foolish, that there seems no point in publishing a book that others will receive only with contempt and ingratitude. Better simply to follow one's own natural inclinations, lead a merry life, and avoid the harrowing task of publishing something either useful or pleasant. Most people know nothing of learning; many despise it. The clod rejects as too difficult whatever isn't cloddish. The pedant dismisses as mere trifling anything that isn't stuffed with obsolete words. Some readers approve only of ancient authors; many men like only their own writing. Here's a man so solemn he won't allow a shadow of levity, and there's one so insipid of taste that he can't endure the salt of a little wit. Some are so flat-nosed¹³ that they dread satire as a man bitten by a rabid dog dreads water; some are so changeable that they like one thing when they're seated and another when they're standing.¹⁴

These people lounge around the taverns, and over their cups they pass judgement on the intelligence of writers. With complete assurance they condemn every author by his writings, just as the whim takes them, plucking each one, as it were, by the beard. But they themselves remain safe – 'out of range', so to speak. No use trying to lay hold of them; these good men are shaved so close, there's not so much as a hair of their heads to catch them by.

¹² Although More's letters express considerable anxiety about the reception of *Utopia*, the claim that he is ambivalent about publishing it would seem to be largely conventional. In a letter of c. 20 September 1516 he told Erasmus (who saw the book through the press), 'I am most anxious to have it published soon', and on 15 December he confided that 'from day to day I look forward to my *Utopia* with the feelings of a mother waiting for her son to return from abroad' (*Selected Letters*, pp. 76, 87).

¹³ The nose, traditionally the organ expressive of anger and derision, is the seat of satire. So those who don't relish satire are flat-nosed.

¹⁴ The last phrase echoes the *Invective against Cicero* (IV.7) of the first-century BC Roman historian Sallust; the paragraph as a whole resembles Erasmus' complaints, in his letter to Maarten van Dorp, about ill-natured readers of *The Praise of Folly* (*CWE*, III, 129).

More to Giles

Moreover, some people are so ungrateful that even though they're delighted with a work, they don't like the author any better because of it. They are no different from rude guests who, after they have been lavishly entertained at a splendid banquet, finally go home stuffed, without a word of thanks to the host who invited them. A fine task, providing at your own expense a banquet for men of such finicky palates and such various tastes, who will remember and reward you with such thanks! *A neat comparison*

Nevertheless, my dear Peter, raise with Hythloday the points I mentioned. Afterwards I will be free to consider the matter once more. But in fact, if he himself gives his consent – since it is late to be wise now that I have finished all the work – in all other considerations about publishing I will follow the advice of my friends, and especially yours. Farewell, my very dear Peter Giles; my regards to your excellent wife. Love me as you always have; I am more fond of you than I have ever been.

THE BEST STATE OF A COMMONWEALTH,
A DISCOURSE BY THE EXTRAORDINARY
RAPHAEL HYTHLODAY, AS RECORDED BY
THE NOTED THOMAS MORE, CITIZEN AND
UNDERSHERIFF¹ OF THE FAMOUS CITY OF
BRITAIN, LONDON
BOOK I

Cuthbert Tunstall

Adage

The most invincible King of England, Henry, the eighth of that name, a prince adorned with the royal accomplishments beyond any other,² had recently some differences of no slight import with Charles, the most serene Prince of Castile,³ and sent me into Flanders as his spokesman to discuss and settle them. I was companion and associate to that incomparable man Cuthbert Tunstall, whom the king has recently created Master of the Rolls, to everyone's enormous satisfaction.⁴ I will say nothing in praise of this man, not because I fear the judgement of a friend might be questioned, but because his integrity and learning are greater than I can describe and too well known everywhere to need my commendation – unless I would, according to the proverb, 'show the sun with a lantern'.

Those appointed by the prince to deal with us, all excellent men, met us at Bruges by pre-arrangement. Their head man and leader was the Mayor of Bruges, a most distinguished person. But their main speaker

¹ More had been an undersheriff of London since 1510. His principal duty was to act as a judge in the Sheriff's Court (a city court that heard a wide variety of cases).

² When he succeeded to the throne in 1509, at the age of seventeen, Henry appeared to be something very close to the humanist ideal of a cultivated, just and peace-loving monarch, and More had enthusiastically heralded his accession in several Latin poems (*CW*, III, Part II, 101–17). By 1516, however, this view had been considerably undermined, especially by the king's fondness for martial (not yet marital) adventure.

³ The disputes between the two nations were commercial ones, especially over tariffs. Charles was grandson of the Emperor Maximilian I, and was Duke of Burgundy after his father's death in 1506. He became, nominally though not formally, Prince of Castile after the death of Ferdinand II (23 January 1516), and Holy Roman Emperor in 1519.

⁴ A royal commission of 7 May 1515 appointed five commissioners, including More, with Tunstall as their chief. Tunstall (1474–1559) was created Master of the Rolls (principal clerk of the Chancery Court) and Vice-Chancellor of the realm on 12 May 1516.

Book I

and guiding spirit was Georges de Themsecke, the Provost of Cassel, a man eloquent by nature as well as by training, also very learned in the law, and most skilful in diplomatic affairs through his ability and long practice. After we had met several times, certain points remained on which we could not come to agreement; so they adjourned the meeting⁵ and went to Brussels for some days to learn their prince's pleasure.

Meanwhile, since my business required it, I went to Antwerp. Of those who visited me while I was there, no one was more welcome to me than Peter Giles. He was a native of Antwerp, a man of high reputation, already appointed to a good position and worthy of the very best: I hardly know whether the young man is distinguished more in learning or in character. Apart from being cultured, virtuous and courteous to all, with his intimates he is so open-hearted, affectionate, loyal and sincere that you would be hard-pressed to find another man anywhere whom you would think comparable to him in all the points of friendship. No one is more modest or more frank; no one better combines simplicity with wisdom. Besides, his conversation is so pleasant, and so witty without malice, that the ardent desire I felt to see again my native country, my home, my wife and my children (from whom I had been separated more than four months) was much eased by his most agreeable company and delightful talk.

Peter Giles

One day after I had heard Mass at Notre Dame, the most beautiful and most popular church in Antwerp, I was about to return to my quarters when I happened to see him talking with a stranger, a man of quite advanced years, with a sunburned face, a long beard, and a cloak hanging loosely from his shoulders; from his face and dress, I took him to be a ship's captain. When Peter saw me, he came up and greeted me. As I was about to reply, he drew me aside and, indicating the man with whom I had seen him talking, said, 'Do you see that fellow? I was just on the point of bringing him straight to you.'

'He would have been very welcome on your behalf', I answered.

'And on his own too, if you knew him', said Peter, 'for there is no mortal alive today can tell you so much about unknown peoples and unexplored lands; and I know that you're always greedy for such information.'

'In that case', said I, 'my guess wasn't a bad one, for at first glance I supposed he was a ship's captain.'

⁵ On or before 21 July 1515. See Introduction, p. xvi.

Book I

‘Then you’re far off the mark’, he replied, ‘for his sailing has not been like that of Palinurus, but more that of Ulysses, or rather of Plato.⁶ This man, who is named Raphael – his family name is Hythloday – knows a good deal of Latin and is particularly learned in Greek. He studied Greek more than Latin because his main interest is philosophy, and in that field he recognised that the Romans have left us nothing very valuable except certain works of Seneca and Cicero.⁷ Being eager to see the world, he left to his brothers the patrimony to which he was entitled at home (he is a Portuguese),⁸ and joined Amerigo Vespucci. He was Vespucci’s constant companion on the last three of his four voyages, accounts of which are now common reading everywhere,⁹ but on the last voyage, he did not return home with him. After much persuasion and expostulation he got Amerigo’s permission to be one of the twenty-four men who were left in a garrison at the farthest point of the last voyage. Being left in this way was altogether agreeable to him, as he was more concerned about his travels than his tomb. He would often say, “The man who has no grave is covered by the sky”, and “Wherever you start from, the road to heaven is the same length.”¹⁰ Yet this attitude would have cost him dear, if God had not been gracious to him. After Vespucci’s departure he travelled through many countries with five companions from the garrison. At last, by strange good fortune, he got via Ceylon to

Aphorism

⁶ Palinurus was Aeneas’ pilot: he dozed at the helm and fell overboard (*Aeneid* v.833–61, vi.337–83). Ulysses’ reputation as a man who saw many cities and knew men’s minds is based on the opening lines of the *Odyssey*. (But Ulysses could also be regarded – as in the opening of the ‘True Story’ of Lucian (Introduction, pp. xx–xxi) – as a notable liar.) According to the Life of Plato by Diogenes Laertius (fl. third century AD), Plato travelled widely in the Mediterranean world (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* iii.6, 18–19).

⁷ This opinion is echoed in More’s 1518 Letter to Oxford (*CW*, xv, 143). Seneca was a Stoic; and though Cicero styled himself an adherent of the sceptical philosophy associated with the later phase of the Platonic Academy, his sympathies in ethical and political theory lay mainly with the Stoics, whose views he often rehearsed at length. Hythloday’s own views are permeated by Stoic ideas.

⁸ Hythloday’s nationality links him with several of the great explorers of the period, who were either Portuguese or sponsored by the King of Portugal. His renunciation of his patrimony recalls the Italian philosopher Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), whose biography More had translated, and whom he greatly admired. See Introduction, p. xxn.

⁹ Two Latin accounts (now of disputed authenticity) of the voyages of the Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci (1451–1512), who sailed for the King of Portugal, were published in the years 1505–7: *New World* and *The Four Voyages of Amerigo Vespucci*. *Utopia* exhibits parallels with both. *Four Voyages* tells that Vespucci left twenty-four men at the farthest point of his last voyage.

¹⁰ The first of these sayings is quoted from the epic poem by Seneca’s nephew Lucan, *Pharsalia* (vii.819); the second is adapted from Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations* i.xliiii.104).