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To what deaf ears should I tell the tale!
Thomas More and the Question of Servitude
in *Utopia*

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Introduction

Thomas More's life was no ordinary matter. "England's leading humanist, great wit, friend of Erasmus [...], author of *Utopia*, family man, man of convictions, ultimately martyr", he is still one of the most familiar figures of the Tudor period.¹ To the public eye his career was what anyone could wish for and yet More was not completely satisfied with it. The lifelong intimate debate between his duty to the King and the one to his faith is not to be ignored when focusing on his writings. His masterpiece, *Utopia*, contains probably the best description of such a dilemma. It is also relevant to mention that *Utopia* was written at the very beginning of More's public career, in 1515. In fact, what is attempted by this thesis is to analyse the relationship between the Question of Servitude – described in book 1 of *Utopia* – and the event of More's life that caused him to confront the same problem. Moreover, it will be essential to set such events in context, dealing with the environment of the Tudor court and the personality of Henry VIII. Indeed, Thomas More's life sets an interesting as much as unique case in the history of the Tudor era and it would deprive this study of much relevance to neglect the context in which *Utopia* came to be.

Thomas More is mostly known for his role as Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII and one of his most trusted advisors. Even more famous is his tragic death: in 1535 More's refusal to pledge to the Oath of Supremacy cost him his life. This untimely departure has vastly contributed to the rise of More's image as a martyr.² And yet, before the day of his imprisonment, he lived a whole life of service to the king, of studying and mastering the

¹ Elton, G. R., *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government, Vol. III: Papers and Reviews 1973-1981*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 344.

² <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> accessed on December 9, 2016.

humanities, of religious devotion and a productive literary career. Taking a closer look at More's life and – especially – at his education, his contacts with northern humanism and his relationship with Erasmus and Pieter Gillis, will provide a far more accurate portrait of the complex and layered mind that produced *Utopia*. Naturally, when taking up the study of the life of a man so engaged in his time and in politics, one is obliged to take into account not only private events, but also the setting of such events. The reign of Henry VIII was a complex historical moment, and More's life and – consequently – his works were shaped consistently by political and social forces.³ Therefore, a more in-depth analysis of the time of More's life will be the focus of one section, and constant reference to the historical context will appear throughout this work.

That being said, we must try to get closer to what the core of this research truly consists of. The question originating this writing process is one of a very specific nature, and a recurring topic in humanist writings.⁴ When he composed book I of *Utopia* as a dialogue, More wrote himself as one of the speakers, the one referred to as Morus, as opposed to the mysterious Raphael Hythlodæus, or Hythloday.⁵ In a separate section, the identity of these two characters (as well as Pieter Gillis, the third interlocutor) will be analysed in depth, but it seems necessary to introduce now a concept essential to the full comprehension of this research question. In fact, both Morus and Hythloday, fictional characters, are here treated as reflections of Thomas More. They are both personification of the author who has created the fictional characters based on two distinct aspects of his

³ Brigden, Susan, *New World, Lost Worlds. The Rule of the Tudors, 1485-1603*, London: The Penguin Press, 2000, pp. 77-80.

⁴ Skinner, Quentin, *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought, Volume one: The Renaissance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, pp. 216-218.

⁵ Henceforth referred to as Hythloday.

life.⁶ Morus represents the public figure, the future Lord Chancellor, the man of law, sheriff, diplomat and councillor to the king, a man of great notoriety and responsibility.⁷ Hythloday, on the other hand, embodies the secret, intimate part of More's personality, unknown to the public. Hythloday is the part of More which is "imbued with the ideals of scholarly and religious detachment".⁸ The topic of this thesis derives from a debate between the characters in *Utopia* on a very sensitive subject: should the intellectual devote his intelligence and skills to the service of the King? Or would his advice go unnoticed or – even worse – rejected by the ruler and his ill-minded advisors, whose counsel the King only seeks to legitimise his dishonourable ends? In the context of civic humanism, it is a fairly recurrent topic and, usually, humanists tended to choose to be involved in political matters.⁹ However, once these questions are set in the context of *Utopia*, they gain a different meaning and have more personal implications. Thomas More went through this choice: he was the humanist who indeed entered the service of the king. It is also true though that his religious devotion and his moral code all ideally rejected most of what the court and the king stood for. The fact that More, rising to the high spheres of the court, would be associated with the opulence and lavishness of Henry VIII was a matter of discomfort for him.¹⁰ The debate between Hythloday and Morus is therefore enriched with a subtler meaning: not only one of a general nature, concerning humanists

⁶ Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 33-34.

⁷ More, Thomas, *Utopia*, edited by Luigi Firpo, Naples: Guida Editori, 2000. p. 16, henceforth referred to as Firpo.

⁸ More, Thomas, *Utopia*, edited by George M. Logan, Robert Martin Adams and Clarence H. Miller, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 23.

⁹ Skinner, p. 218.

¹⁰ Harpsfield, Nicholas, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore, Knight*, ed. Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock, London: Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 36-38.

and intellectuals in all the courts of sixteenth-century Europe, but also one pointing to More's own condition at the English court.

In the course of book 1, the two characters do not reach an agreement, nor a solution to the Question of Servitude. This, one could argue, puts an end to the debate and could prevent anyone from venturing down a road which is known to be a dead end. On the contrary, the very impossibility of reaching a conclusion could be a starting point, rather than a forced ending. This is possible once it is established that, in the end, More did find his solution, however drastic it can be considered. Ultimately, and for a very precise reason, Thomas More decided that limiting the evil a ruler can do by compromising his own values was not acceptable to him any longer. After almost twenty years at the service of the King, moreover, he had performed his duty as an advisor and did not need to bend to the Oath of Supremacy.¹¹

Analysing *Utopia* is also not a simple task. Since its publication in 1516, *Utopia* has been the object of many debates on its content and its interpretation. As Chambers pointed out: “few books have been more misunderstood than *Utopia*”.¹² One of the most problematic points is to determine More's authorial intent. In fact, it is not easy to establish whether More's endorsement of the ideal commonwealth he described was sincere or satirical.¹³ A significant step forward in the analysis of this problem can be made through the extensive paratext surrounding *Utopia*. The many letters written by and to More and his fellow northern humanists provide significant information on the background and scope of the book and – especially – on the audience it was meant for.¹⁴

¹¹ Ackroyd, Peter, *The Life of Thomas More*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1998, pp. 238-241.

¹² Chambers, R. W., *Thomas More*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1935, p. 125.

¹³ Logan, George M., *The Meaning of More's Utopia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 269-270.

¹⁴ Logan, pp. 20-21.

Erasmus, More's intimate friend, was decisive in the publication of the book. Others, such as Busleyden and Gillis maintained a frequent correspondence discussing More's work and commending it to other humanists. Despite the considerable amount of studies on *Utopia* and its paratext, however, this *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus de optimo rei publicae statu, deque nova insula Utopia*¹⁵ still fails to be univocally interpreted. Scholars disagree on More's true intentions and one of the most controversial points concerns Utopian communism. After all, the ambivalence begins with the title itself: only the selected intellectuals who knew Greek would appreciate the subtlety of the double meaning of εὐ/ οὐτοπία (happy or non-existing place). To the others, it would simply sound as an exotic name, quite fitting for a far-away land not that different, to sixteenth-century Europeans, from India or America. A proof of *Utopia*'s wide resonance and variety of interpretations is the so-called Utopian socialism that Marx and Engels mentioned in the *Communist Manifesto*.¹⁶ Many have interpreted *Utopia* as an indirect but clear comparison with England, a basis for the analysis of all the problems of More's native land.¹⁷ Alternatively, the book has been considered a praise of utmost rationality at the service of the common good: the negative consequence of such an approach seems to be the loss of any individual or personal feature.¹⁸ The difficulties in analysing *Utopia* derive also from another problem. Even though Hythloday's narration presents the ideal land, governed by reason, Utopian customs present several contradictions. That is, for example, the case with the treatment of slaves (pp. 185-187) and the rather imperialistic attitude that Utopians have when it comes to war (pp. 201-

¹⁵ A truly golden handbook, no less beneficial than entertaining, on the best state of Commonwealth and the new Island of Utopia.

¹⁶ Skinner, p. 257.

¹⁷ Firpo, p. 17.

¹⁸ Petrina, Alessandra, "Le Dottrine Politiche: utopie e *Realpolitik*", in Michele Stanco, ed., *La Letteratura Inglese dall'Umanesimo al Rinascimento*, Roma: Carocci editore, 2016, p. 54.

217).¹⁹ Finally, as the work of a martyr, *Utopia* has been the object of studies by Catholic scholars. In this case however, we must take into account the fact that More is describing an ideal society of non-Christians. Moreover, some of the Utopian practices include divorce and euthanasia, both condemned by the Catholic Church. This problem is approached generally through the dialogue in book 1. In fact, as shown in chapter 4, Morus often disagrees with Hythloday, suggesting that, without Christian faith, Utopia's rationalism can never be enough.²⁰

What should always be kept in mind is that More wanted his work to be elusive and, in full humanist tradition, dedicated only to a circle of intellectuals. Therefore, allusions, contradictions and the use of Greek name all serve the same purpose of making the true meaning of this book clear only to a selected audience.²¹ In addition to that, it should not be forgotten that “the survival rate for those closest to Henry VIII roughly resembles the actuarial record of the First Politburo” and More could not afford to speak directly against the monarch.²² The *Dialogue of Counsel*, instead, can be considered a reflection on More's personal problem, in an indirect manner, at a crucial point of his life. Naturally, More was not the first to explore such a problem. As we shall see, it was typical of humanist writings and had its origins in classical authors.

¹⁹ McCutcheon, Elizabeth, “Denying the Contrary: More's use of Litotes in the *Utopia*”, *Moreana*, 31-32 (1971), pp. 115-116.

²⁰ Logan, pp. 219-220.

²¹ Surtz, Edward, S. J., *Utopia as a Work of Literary Art*, in *Utopia*, edited by Edward Surtz, S. J. and J. H. Hexter, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, pp. cxlvii-cl.

²² Greenblatt, p. 15.

1. Humanism and Political Thought

1.1 The contribution of Scholasticism and the origins of Humanism

It would be a mistake to imply Scholasticism “made no contribution [...] to the great intellectual awakening”¹ that lies at the basis of the very definition of Renaissance. Paul Kristeller’s definition of Renaissance, in fact, labels it as a period dating roughly from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, characterised by a significant rebirth of the arts and a flourishing of the *studia humanitatis*.² The progressive and innovative aspects of the Renaissance are undoubtedly striking features of this historical period, and yet one must not think that such a cultural revolution could have taken place without other factors paving the way for it. Scholastic thought and Humanistic thought can easily be compared and the difference between the two is not the object of discussion here. What is important to keep in mind and worth analysing is how Scholasticism led to the spread of the Humanist culture, which eventually took its place across European countries. Doing so will provide a more thorough comprehension of this intellectual phenomenon with specific attention to its sources.

To name an example, and surely not an insignificant one, one can simply think of the rediscovery of Aristotle’s philosophical works, preserved in Arabic and generally obtained by European scholars through the Caliphate of Cordoba.³ Thanks to scholars such as Bishop Raymond of Toledo, Aristotle’s works appeared across Europe in Latin

¹ Skinner, Quentin, *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought, Volume one: The Renaissance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 49.

² Kristeller, Paul Oskar, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts. Collected Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 6.

³ Skinner, p. 50.

translations already in the twelfth century and soon their influence was evident in many fields of the intellectual life. Political life in particular was heavily challenged by Aristotle's moral and political theories.⁴ Up to that point, Augustinian conceptions were the fundamentals on which a vision of political society and life itself was based. Aristotle's *Politics* contributed to the transition from the Augustinian concept of political society as an order set by God on mankind "as a remedy for their sins"⁵ to society as a "human creation" meant to "fulfil purely mundane ends".⁶ Another fundamental difference lies in the meaning given to life on earth: Augustine described it as a preparation to what lies ahead, while Aristotle saw the *polis* as a "self-sufficient ideal" that does not require any further purpose to be meaningful.⁷ The opposition between the concepts of otherworldly preoccupations and self-sufficiency were partly reconciled by a movement originating at the University of Paris at the hands of the Dominicans. They set off to elaborate a whole new philosophical system based on both Greek and Christian thought. At the end of the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas wrote the *Summary of Theology*, "a complete Christian philosophy founded on [...] a 'thorough acceptance' of Aristotelian moral and political thought".⁸ Aquinas also wrote (but never finished) the treatise *The Rule of Princes* adapting "Aristotle's views on law and civil society"⁹ to feudal and monarchical Europe. Scholastic theorists were mainly concerned with political independence and republican self-government. This choice was motivated partly with the tendency to consider Rome's Republican period – rather than the Empire – as the pinnacle of Roman

⁴ Skinner, pp. 50-51.

⁵ Skinner, p. 50.

⁶ Skinner, p. 50.

⁷ Wilks, Michael, *The Problem of Sovereignty in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963, pp. 150-151.

⁸ Knowles, David, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, London: Longmans, 1962, p. 42.

⁹ Skinner, p. 51.

history. All of this contributed to the beginning of a tradition that would consistently endure throughout the Renaissance: the re-evaluation of classical authors. Later Republican characters such as Cato and Cicero used to be models of stoic aloofness, detachment from “the turmoil of political life”.¹⁰ This attitude towards them changed completely and they became symbols of civic virtue, fighting to preserve the liberty of the Republic against the threat of tyranny.

When discussing the origins of humanist culture, it is advisable to consider Italian Humanism as an individual entity because of its specific features. In fact, however significant the influence of Scholasticism has been throughout Europe, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Italy was undoubtedly the centre of culture and of the development of arts.¹¹ Jacob Burckhardt states that Renaissance’s main cultural characteristics reached other European countries under direct Italian influence;¹² the modality of these contacts will be analysed in a later paragraph. The basis for such a clean-cut statement can be questioned, and yet there are some useful points we can obtain from Burckhardt’s work. For example, it could be helpful to follow some of the criteria identified by Burckhardt as general features in the arts, literature and studies of the Renaissance. To name a few of them: the return to the past for models, the discovery of the world, the focus on the human being and individualism.¹³

Generally speaking, we think of Humanism as the exaltation of human values, as opposed to the exaltation of God prevailing during the Middle Ages. More specifically

¹⁰ Skinner, p. 54.

¹¹ Milner, J. Stephen, “The Italian Peninsula: Reception and Dissemination”, in David Rundle, ed., *Humanism in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2012, p.3.

¹² Burckhardt, Jacob, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, New York: Harper&Brothers, 1958, p. 12.

¹³ Kristeller, pp. 23-24.

however, the definition of Humanism should apply to the literary corpus and the thought which is to be found in the writings of humanists, where humanists are those who were involved with the *studia humanitatis*.¹⁴ These consisted of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, moral philosophy and the study of classical Greek and Latin authors. Such disciplines were at the core of Italian Renaissance culture and their influence reached many other fields of knowledge. It is important, however, to keep in mind that they were always separated from sciences, philosophy (except moral philosophy), theology and literature in the vernacular. The humanistic corpus was a lay corpus with a specific collocation, and yet opposed neither theology nor science. In this sense the humanists could be considered some kind of literary historians *ante litteram*.¹⁵ They usually worked as professors in the universities, but they were also frequently found in the profession of secretaries or chancellors, due to their ability in crafting documents, letters and speeches. A most relevant consequence is the deep influence they had on the schooling of entire generations of privileged people. Naturally, the humanistic career was not for everybody, and yet people who did not follow the strictly humanistic professions cited above could still do their part in the spread of this culture. Rulers, statesmen, lawyers, doctors, philosophers and others sometimes contributed to the humanistic literary production. This is how humanism reached many areas of human knowledge and left its trace.

One of the chief intents of humanists in Italy was that of studying classical Latin literature and becoming capable of imitating it. Thanks to the rediscovery of lost authors made by the likes of Poggio Bracciolini, humanists could work on their editions providing amended versions that were always the product of long and thorough studies.¹⁶ In fact, it

¹⁴ Kristeller, p. 76.

¹⁵ Kristeller, p. 77.

¹⁶ Milner, p. 7.

was customary for humanists to acquire a better understanding of a work or an author through research on the history and the mythology surrounding them. Their original works were usually in Latin since they believed using the same linguistic tool would imply a more valuable imitation of their models.¹⁷ Moreover, it is to a great extent due to humanists' efforts if the Greek language resurfaced in Europe after centuries of oblivion. In this process, there was a decisive contribution from the East: Greek language and literature had never sunk into darkness in Byzantium, where most of the works were preserved. They took up the burdensome task of collecting Greek works and translating them into Latin, providing commentaries and notes that allowed common people to read a whole new set of literary works. Reading Greek authors also had a spill-over effect, influencing literature, theology, science and philosophy. Such great importance was given to human sciences¹⁸ due to a shared ideal that they were imbued with certain desirable human values. Renaissance Humanists perceived themselves as part of a "cultural project" involving the spread of human sciences, a project that encompassed all mankind.¹⁹

Humanists looked up to classical authors when defining the role of the poet as the person entrusted with the difficult task of moral edification. Indeed, humanist writings are full of precepts and *exempla* meant to guide the reader towards the virtuous models set by Cicero and others. Even unexpected genres were involved in this trend: it was not uncommon to find praises of civic virtue or patriotism in historiographies, biographies and hagiographies.²⁰ The essay was one of the favourite genres, followed by the letter,

¹⁷ Kristeller, p. 10.

¹⁸ Kristeller applies the definition of human sciences to those subjects which help the student to improve their speaking and writing styles, p. 28.

¹⁹ Kristeller, p. 28.

²⁰ Kristeller, p. 30.

which allowed the expression of one's subjective opinion. Humanist writings were generally lay, usually independent from medieval scholastic traditions. As previously mentioned, Aristotle's philosophy had a huge impact on humanistic culture and some concepts derive directly from his works, such as *Politics* and *Ethics*. The idea of a Supreme Good which should not involve seeking external advantages, contemplative life as the highest aim of human life and the difference between moral and intellectual virtues all come from Aristotle. As far as other philosophers are concerned, Plato's influence was less significant due to the lack of systematic approach in his works ²¹; Cicero and Seneca's Stoicism were very popular especially for the definition of virtue as the Superior Good, but some humanists deemed it too strict for its employment of *apatheia* in order to reach such virtue. Thanks to the rediscovery of Lucretius and Diogenes Laertius the Epicurean ideal of intellectual pleasure as life's goal was revalued and Scepticism also gained a newfound positive reputation through the spread of the works of Sextus Empiricus. ²² Very significant is the way humanists employed these new philosophical sources. It can be defined eclectic, since the material was taken from different authors and specific ideas or thoughts were then combined with those of other authors. Clean-cut definitions between different philosophical theories started to fade and thinkers such as Isocrates, Plutarch and Lucian were used for the same purpose, however different their thought might have been. It can also be defined as a syncretic employment of sources, for several classical authors were examined at the same time extrapolating from their works a sort of common wisdom to take as a model.²³ Quotations were very common and served the main

²¹ Kristeller, pp. 38-39.

²² Kristeller, p. 40.

²³ Kristeller, p. 41.

purpose of ensuring the authority of humanist writings, besides giving it a more polished outlook.

1.2 Humanism in England

Traditionally, Italy has always been considered the original birthplace of Renaissance humanism. Italy acted both as the cradle of humanists going abroad in search of new texts to discover and as a magnet for foreigners who wished to take part in the bustling and stimulating cultural life of the peninsula's artistic centres.²⁴ As stated before, the extent to which Italian humanism was essential to the presence of similar ideas in other countries is debatable. However, according to many scholars, Kristeller among them, a study of humanism of any kind, geographic area or decade would be incomplete if it did not include at least a reference to Italian humanism.²⁵ England, as we shall see, is no exception.

Scholastic curricula were already being replaced by humanistic ones outside Italy towards the second half of the fifteenth century. Scholars travelled from Italy to foreign universities and began combining the study of Latin and Greek with that of the *studia humanitatis*. The pioneer of such an important change in England was the Venetian Pietro del Monte, author of the first humanist treatise written in England: *De Vitiarum et Virtutum inter se Differentia*.²⁶ He arrived in London on the Pope's orders and remained for nearly five years. More importantly, he served as literary advisor to Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, considered the first English patron of humanism. As well as for Italy, the pivotal figures in the spread of humanist culture were often to be found among politicians

²⁴ Milner, p. 1.

²⁵ Kristeller, pp. 3-8.

²⁶ Skinner, p. 194.

and princes, rather than writers. Duke Humphrey is the greatest example when it comes to the case of England.²⁷ Thanks to del Monte's advice, Humphrey hired the first Italian *magister*: Tito Livio Frulovisi, author of a *Life of Henry V*, who held that position until 1438.²⁸ This commission played an important role in the spread of humanist style and ideas, despite the arguable artistic quality of the works by Frulovisi, when it appeared in the pages of an English chronicle for the first time. Another important contribution due to del Monte is the assembling of Humphrey's personal library: he fostered the Duke's passion for book-collecting and even brought some books and manuscripts from Italy himself.²⁹ Humphrey employed not only Italian humanists: his circle in fact included also some "learned Englishmen, some of whom were affected in a greater or lesser degree by humanism".³⁰ Among them was Thomas Bekynton, who served as Humphrey's chancellor but was also "able to promote and foster humane studies in others".³¹ His greatest personal contribution was the introduction of new standards of Italian inspiration into his works, doing for the language of diplomacy "what Frulovisi [did] for the methods of English historiography".³² Bekynton set an important trend for contemporary and future diplomacy: due to his efforts, the "usefulness of classical Latinity" became an almost unquestionable aspect, especially in negotiations with Italian courts, and a "valuable asset for diplomatists".³³ Moreover, his Latin correspondence and his passion for collecting ancient texts further disclose the influence humanism had on him. The most important poet in Humphrey's circle was undoubtedly John Lydgate. Before joining

²⁷ Petrina, Alessandra, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England: The Case of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester*, Leiden: Brill, 2004, pp. 6-7.

²⁸ Rundle, p. 342.

²⁹ Skinner, pp. 194-195.

³⁰ Weiss, p. 71.

³¹ Weiss, p. 73.

³² Weiss, p. 74.

³³ Weiss, p. 75.

Bekynton and the others, Lydgate had already written and translated successfully for other patrons. The great advantage he gained from Humphrey's patronage was the access to many new authors previously unavailable to him. Despite embracing the New Learning, Lydgate never strayed from the well-established scholastic approach to texts and "always felt his debt with medieval literature, his master Chaucer above all".³⁴ He can be credited with the important contribution of collecting, translating and adapting to an English readership many Italian works that would significantly shape English literature in the following years. As an example, his most famous work, *The Fall of Princes*, rather than a simple translation of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*, became a wider and more inclusive poem, enriched with many examples of writers' advice to kings.³⁵ Finally, John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, "was the English nobleman of his age who came closest to the Italian prince of the Renaissance."³⁶ His political and intellectual approaches and his patronage of scholars is not much different from that of contemporary Italian personalities. He translated Cicero and was also responsible for introducing the "Law Padowe" into England.³⁷

Once the *studia humanitatis* gained popularity, many English scholars began moving to Italy to embrace the humanities in the Universities. Throughout the Middle Ages it was far from uncommon for students from England to attend Italian universities: after all they "enjoyed the highest reputation in Northern Europe"³⁸ especially for law and medicine. The new element was that scholars arriving to Italy often left their careers in one of the traditional disciplines to turn to the humanities outside the universities. Thomas

³⁴ Petrina, pp. 281-283.

³⁵ Petrina, Alessandra, "Le Dottrine Politiche: utopie e *Realpolitik*", in Michele Stanco, ed., *La Letteratura Inglese dall'Umanesimo al Rinascimento*, Roma: Carocci editore, 2016, pp. 49-50.

³⁶ Weiss, p. 112.

³⁷ Kristeller, p. 78.

³⁸ Skinner, p. 196.

Linacre is an example of this: set to get a medical degree in Padua, he soon moved to Rome, then Florence and Venice, where he pursued the study of Greek and the humanities.³⁹ Rudolph Agricola also shifted towards rhetoric and Greek after his arrival in Italy and when he moved back to Germany he became a “teacher of the humanities”⁴⁰ and even received praises from Erasmus. More and more students were moving to Italy specifically to expand their knowledge of the humanities: in the last two decades of the fifteenth century, a group of Oxford students settled in Italy, among them William Grocyn. He chose Florence as his new home and studied with Angelo Poliziano. Another was William Latimer, who pursued his Greek studies at the University of Padua.⁴¹ The most important is arguably John Colet, who spent three years in the peninsula during which he enriched his education with the study of the humanities. When he returned to England in fact, he proved how he had embraced humanist culture when he delivered a series of lectures in Oxford, *An Exposition of St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*.⁴² This is an important example because Colet’s approach seemed “unequivocally humanist in method as well as in tone”.⁴³ That is to say, his main concern was not to derive some universal doctrine from the text, but to explain the true meaning of it thanks to the analysis of its historical context, without mentioning any scholastic authority. Just like Colet, many others eventually returned to England, where they often taught at universities. The presence of several professors with a humanist training gradually led to the partial “overthrow of scholasticism”.⁴⁴

³⁹ Woolfson, Jonathan, *Padua and the Tudors: English Students in Italy, 1485-1603*, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1998, pp. 113-114.

⁴⁰ Skinner, p. 197.

⁴¹ Woolfson, pp. 106-107.

⁴² Skinner, pp.209-211.

⁴³ Skinner, p. 209.

⁴⁴ Skinner, p. 196.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, a “self-confident humanist culture”⁴⁵ had appeared throughout England. A good example of this is the prefatory letter to *Utopia* written in 1516 by John Desmarais. He states that even though “praise for learning has belonged almost exclusively to Greece and Italy”, their civilisation had by then been exported to northern Europe and, in virtue of the presence in England of “men of such talent as to be able to contend with antiquity itself”⁴⁶, some outstanding successes had been achieved by English humanists.⁴⁷ However, despite the opinion of a small group of critics such as Douglas Bush, who wrote that “the real character of English humanism”⁴⁸ dates back to the twelfth century, it can hardly be questioned⁴⁹ that

The northern humanists were crucially dependent, both in their technical scholarship and in their more general outlook on social and political life, on the range of concepts and theories already developed by the humanists of *quattrocento* Italy.⁵⁰

It is most important, though, to keep in mind a few features of English humanism in the fifteenth century which set it apart from contemporary Italian humanism. First of all, the cult of the antique did not affect England in such a deep way as it did Italy. Indeed, cultural values in Italy had been transformed by humanism, and the new intellectual system was praised for having replaced a set of ideas from the Middle Ages. English humanism, on the other hand, was rather perceived as “refinement in taste” which could never take the place of Scholasticism.⁵¹ Wakelin goes as far as defining English

⁴⁵ Skinner, p. 197.

⁴⁶ More, Thomas, *Utopia*, edited by Edward Surtz, S.J. and J. H. Hexter, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, p. 27.

⁴⁷ Desmarais was obviously referring to Thomas More, humanist and author of *Utopia*.

⁴⁸ Bush, Douglas, *The Renaissance and English Humanism*, Toronto: University Press, 1939, pp. 47-49.

⁴⁹ Some do not agree with the assumption of Italian humanism’s decisive role in the arrival of humanism to England and other northern countries. Johan Nordström for example tends to consider France, the Avignon Papacy in particular, as one of the main players in the spread of humanist culture. See *Moyen Âge et Renaissance*, translated by T. Hammar, Paris: Librairie Stock, 1933.

⁵⁰ Skinner, p. 201.

⁵¹ Weiss, p. 179.

humanism as a “diluted” form of humanism,⁵² on the basis of Weiss’s statement that “pure humanists did not exist in England”.⁵³ A reason for this lies in a very important consideration: in England as in Italy, those who took up the *studia humanitatis* were in large majority ecclesiastics, especially in the first stage. Individuals such as those named above – Tiptoft for example – constituted remarkable exceptions. This is strictly linked to another fundamental difference between English and Italian humanism. As Weiss pointed out, many factors indicate that “humanism was adopted in England during the fifteenth century as a means rather than an end”.⁵⁴ This type of humanism can be defined as utilitarian and implied an assimilation of elements from Italy that would be profitable for philosophy, theology or diplomacy. Evidence of this utilitarian character is embodied in the private libraries of collectors such as Humphrey: it comprised several treatises on grammar, epistolaries, collections of orations, books on medicine and philosophy,⁵⁵ and yet no book that could be strictly catalogued as entertainment writing.⁵⁶ As an example, the relevance that diplomacy gained thanks to the influence of humanism has already been named. Bekynton himself in his book collecting did not stray too far from this utilitarian aim, perhaps because his duty left him with insufficient time to dedicate to other types of writing.⁵⁷

As a result, the creation of a “humanistic society” was heavily challenged in England: Weiss continues his statement on pure humanism saying that “there were only some schoolmen who pursued modern as well as scholastic studies”.⁵⁸ This approach has

⁵² Wakelin, pp. 289-305.

⁵³ Weiss, p. 183.

⁵⁴ Weiss, p. 182.

⁵⁵ Wakelin, pp. 274-276.

⁵⁶ Weiss, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Weiss, pp. 71-76.

⁵⁸ Weiss, p. 183.

however been revisited and confuted in many critical writings after Weiss's. In fact, it would be an incomplete account of the phenomenon of humanism in England if regional differences were not included in the picture, reducing the analysis of humanism in England simply as a comparison with Italy. Rather than a passive imitation of the superior Italian model, such considerations allow us to view humanism in England as a more specific reality that was modelled after specific political and social circumstances.⁵⁹ English humanism was actually a vibrant cultural movement that pushed for intercultural exchanges, as seen with the Englishmen in Italy and the Italian humanists in England. Rather than a barren and limited attention towards the classical models of the humanist canon, English humanism focused towards southern Europe with an attentive eye. Last but not least, this phenomenon should be credited with another important achievement: contributing to the rise of England to a prominent position in the socio-political map of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe.⁶⁰

However, another important consideration hence ensues: England was never a battlefield for humanists and schoolmen attacking each other. The co-existence and often intertwining of the New Learning and scholastic culture were decisive in laying the basis for the future achievements of outstanding English minds, such as Thomas More. Upon further research, it is in fact easy to single out “strong humanistic elements” and at the same time “some very solid scholastic foundations” in many great English scholars.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Petrina, 2016, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Petrina, 2004, p. 49.

⁶¹ Weiss, p. 183.

1.3 The Court of Henry VIII

When Henry VIII ascended the throne in 1509, the English subjects celebrated him with such great enthusiasm that he was “hailed as an ideal prince”.⁶² And yet, by the time his “Great Matter”⁶³ had become a sensational scandal, the perception of this great Tudor monarch had already changed among the population: from great pacifier and *Defensor fidei*, to ruthless tyrant and *Destructor fidei*.⁶⁴ After the mayhem stirred up by the Act of Supremacy, however, Henry VIII reigned over England for another decade, a dark decade marked the execution of many opponents, tensions within the court and with the Papacy, more marriages and annulments.⁶⁵ After a promising start, Henry’s kingdom turned into an oppressive monarchy. In the early years of his rule, in fact, he strived to maintain many of the promises he made at the time of his coronation, he succeeded in keeping England at peace and he surrounded himself with skilled and well esteemed advisors. After a few years, however, it became apparent to the population that their country was “sliding into tyranny”⁶⁶ and would have to endure such a dire circumstance until the death of the monarch. It is of great importance to gain a deeper understanding of how things worked at the court of Henry VIII, especially in terms of censorship and freedom of speech, in order to explore what was the context and the resonance of an extraordinary work such as *Utopia*.

His father, Henry VII, put an end to the War of the Roses and installed the Tudor dynasty on the throne.⁶⁷ He proceeded to establish peace in England by marrying into the

⁶² Walker, Greg, *Writing under Tyranny*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 1.

⁶³ Walker, p.1.

⁶⁴ Walker, p. 22.

⁶⁵ Caspari, Fritz, *Humanism and the Social Order in the Tudor England*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954, pp. 34-38.

⁶⁶ Walker, p. 2.

⁶⁷ Pollard, Anthony, James, *North-Eastern England during the Wars of the Roses: Lay Society, War, and Politics: 1450-1500*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1990, pp. 124-126.

York family and—most importantly—by enacting a fair amount of social and financial reforms.⁶⁸ Henry VII achieved several positive results throughout his reign, such as rebuilding the finances of the kingdom. Moreover, he created special councils and employed justices of peace to enforce social order in the North and in Wales.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, his enforcement of royal taxes weighed heavily on the people and, consequently, on their perception of the monarch.⁷⁰ He also received contributions from feudal obligations, which enriched the royal treasure. This meant that, upon his death in 1509, he left a huge fortune to his son, together with a stable kingdom which was entering a long and prosperous period of peace.⁷¹ The impact of Henry VII's reforms, in fact, increased the power of the monarch significantly and paved the way for the flourishing of England as a great European power under his successors. Despite being often criticised for his strict measures and often unpopular decisions, Henry VII was undoubtedly responsible for the rise of England's Golden Age thanks to his careful administration of the crown in such a difficult transition period.⁷²

As the second born, young Henry was not meant for the throne, which his brother Arthur was going to sit on.⁷³ Henry VII's plans for prosperous times to come for England were further embodied in the name he chose for his first born: Arthur. This name had a suggestive connotation, since it came from the mythological king who was destined to rule over a united kingdom. Unexpectedly, Arthur died in 1502 shortly after marrying Catherine of Aragon, leaving Henry as the heir to the British throne. The marriage to

⁶⁸ Caspari, p. 38.

⁶⁹ Caspari, p. 40.

⁷⁰ Wilks, Michael, *The Problem of Sovereignty in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963, pp. 235-236.

⁷¹ Wilks, p. 237.

⁷² Walker, p. 9.

⁷³ McGurk, John, *The Tudor Monarchies, 1485-1603*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 80-81.

Catherine was a political move to seal an alliance with Spain, and therefore Henry married his brother's widow not to lose the benefits of such a strategic union.⁷⁴ When he became the second Tudor monarch, Henry seemed inclined to follow the footsteps of his father and promote a new Golden Age. This is further testified by a *Carmen gratulatorium* composed by Thomas More on the occasion of the coronation, where he described Henry's ascension as the end of a period of slavery and the beginning of a new era.⁷⁵ Indeed, until the breakout of the so called "divorce crisis" (1527-1532), England enjoyed a remarkable period of peace.⁷⁶

Henry made his court the centre not only of power, but also of patronage. In the sixteenth century, humanists and learned men "were in one way or another licensed by the Crown" and often relied "upon royal patronage or protection".⁷⁷ It was dangerous to be in the king's close circle, and yet it was the best way for anybody who did not hold a title to climb higher on the social ladder. Henry, in fact, relied considerably on people of common origins: he felt he could trust them more than the nobles, since they had no claim to the throne.⁷⁸ People such as Thomas Cromwell and Cardinal Wolsey managed to thrive under Henry's service, even if Wolsey eventually fell out of favour. The court of Henry VIII has become a symbol of splendour, opulence, glamour and intrigue, but at the same time the monarch cannot be remembered without thinking about his haughty behaviour, his quick-tempered personality, his whimsicality and his ruthlessness when someone dared to cross him in any way.⁷⁹ Humanists and courtiers alike were then in a dangerous

⁷⁴ Caspari, pp. 40-41.

⁷⁵ Walker, p. 9.

⁷⁶ Latey, Maurice, *Tyranny: A Study in the Abuse of Power*, London: Macmillan, 1969, p. 195.

⁷⁷ Walker, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Latey, p. 196.

⁷⁹ Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 27-29.

position, one which implied that gaining and maintaining the king's favour was vital. When Henry "began to break the accepted rules of good lordship and to [...] impose his will on his subjects" it became apparent that the country was not ruled by a "*primus inter pares*".⁸⁰ In fact, Henry believed the Tudor dynasty had gained the throne out of God's own will and insisted for other nobles to call him "Your Majesty" instead of "Sire", considering himself by far superior to them. The desire for power, however, hid a great insecurity: at the end of the War of the Roses, other noble families had equally valid claims to the English throne, and many of these families still populated the English court.⁸¹ Everyone was a potential threat to the king, who acted brutally against the slightest suspicion of treason, as in the case of the Duke of Buckingham's execution.⁸² Henry made sure that news of each new death sentence reached the nobles and enforced an atmosphere of fear at the court, where everybody had better be careful with their words.

As previously stated, all intellectuals relied on the king's patronage and were sometimes included in his circle of advisors. Such proximity to the high spheres of the court meant that the pressures of the king's regime affected them personally. Reacting to such pressures could happen in the form of traditional "work[s] of supplication or counsel", a *speculum principis* for example, which was a conventional means of social protest offered to the ruler himself.⁸³ Some of them did try, using ancient and authoritative sources to distance and therefore partly dissimulate the direct message of their writings. William Thynne, for example, tried to "resurrect the father of English poetry", Chaucer, to speak of a moderate and reforming Catholicism.⁸⁴ Thomas Elyot employed biblical

⁸⁰ Walker, p. 13.

⁸¹ Hoak, Dale, *Tudor Political Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 6-7.

⁸² McGurk, p. 77.

⁸³ Walker, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Walker, p. 25.

wisdom and classical scholarship to discuss political disorder. Thomas More's *Life of Richard III* offers an "allegorical account of the effects of tyranny upon the lives and assumptions of his subjects".⁸⁵ Henry VIII, however, did not allow any direct opposition to the Crown. As shown above, several writers at his court tried to offer good advice to the monarch through handbooks of political and moral counsel or speculative writings on the interests of the commonwealth.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, eventually it appeared to everybody that the "struggle to reclaim Henry from tyranny" was beyond repair.⁸⁷ In 1534 the Act of Succession stated that whoever merely spoke against the marriage of the king to Ann Boleyn would be imprisoned in the Tower of London and suffer the loss of all his lands and properties "at the king's pleasure".⁸⁸ The Act also implied that "a man's conscience as well as his body was now the king's property, to manipulate as he wished, and it was subject to the same harsh demands and penalties".⁸⁹ In other words, anyone who wished to keep their life and their family safe, would not have spoken directly against the king's decisions and ideas.

Throughout his long reign, Henry sentenced to death a tremendous amount of people as a direct result of both his policies and his personal vendettas. Many of his victims, such as More and Wolsey, used to figure among the king's closest advisors and collaborators, proving that nobody – not even the king's wife – was safe. By the time of his death, in fact, the once promising prince and enlightened ruler was considered a tyrant by most of the population. These were the circumstances in which a revolutionary work such as *Utopia* was conceived.

⁸⁵ Walker, p. 26.

⁸⁶ Caspari, p. 41.

⁸⁷ Walker, p. 3.

⁸⁸ Walker, p. 25.

⁸⁹ Walker, p. 24.

2. Thomas More (1477-1535)

2.1 Early years: education, early works and friendship with Erasmus

“History knows only a few men with as quick a mind, as vigorous a brain, as noble a nature and as many extraordinary virtues as Thomas More had”.¹ Through the letters penned by his dear friend Erasmus and through the biography written by his son-in-law William Roper, a great deal is known about the life of the great English humanist. Blessed with a remarkable mind, Thomas More had a brilliant career that rose rapidly until he obtained the prestigious position of Lord Chancellor. After years of proximity to Henry VIII, however, he fell out of the king’s favour when he refused to accept the Oath of Supremacy. More’s tragic death is emblematic of a sensational period of English history, an example of martyrdom for the Catholic Church and the premature end to the life of a man with a conscience “purer and more immaculate than snow”² so that he chose to die instead of acting against it. He never neglected his job as a lawyer nor his political occupations, and yet found the time to produce a number of treatises, epigrams and other works (both in Latin and in English) allow him to be remembered also as a great author. The most famous is undoubtedly *Utopia*, a book of difficult categorisation that stands in the English literature of the early sixteenth century as an exceptional example of socio-political criticism.³ A deeper understanding of how Thomas More’s life was shaped by his education, his culture and his contacts with the great Dutch humanist Erasmus can help in the difficult task of understanding *Utopia*’s many-layered meanings.

¹ Cinquino, Joseph, in Roper, William, *Vita di Tommaso Moro*, edited by Joseph Cinquino, Naples: M. D’Auria Editore, 1968, p. 5.

² *The Epistles of Erasmus*, vol. 3., ed. Francis M. Nichols, New York: Russell and Russell, 1962, pp. 387-401.

³ More, Thomas, *Utopia*, edited by Luigi Firpo, Naples: Guida Editori, 2000. p. 11.

Son of John, a lawyer, and Agnes Granger, Thomas More was born in London in 1477. He studied Latin with the Franciscans fathers of St. Anthony's school until the age of twelve.⁴ Later, due to his father's decision, he was employed in the household of Cardinal Morton as a pageboy, where he was educated in good manners and made a good impression thanks to his personality. Cardinal Morton was an important character in London, appointed first Archbishop of Canterbury and later Lord Chancellor by Henry VII.⁵ Morton is remembered fondly by More in *Utopia* (book 1) as a man of good principles who is not flattered by adulators.⁶ This fondness and admiration was reciprocated, since Cardinal Morton praised his intelligence constantly to the guests in his household saying young Thomas would "become a wonderful man".⁷ Thanks to Cardinal Morton's support, Thomas More was able to attend Canterbury College in Oxford, where he studied Greek and philosophy. This period was significant to More's formation because it marked his involvement with humanist culture. In fact, among his professors were Thomas Linacre and William Grocyn, both humanists who had lived and studied in Italy. Young Thomas was fascinated by his humanist studies and never truly abandoned them, as many of his minor works testify.⁸ After mastering his classical studies, More was admitted into New Inn in order to follow John's footsteps and study law. He continued his training at Lincoln's Inn thanks to a small income his father provided him with until he became a skilled lawyer. He taught at Furnival's Inn for a few years while he lived in the Charterhouse of London, where he conducted a monastic life

⁴ Ackroyd, Peter, *The Life of Thomas More*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1998, p. 15.

⁵ Roper, William, *Vita di Tommaso Moro*, edited by Joseph Cinquino, Naples: M. D'Auria Editore, 1968, p. 27.

⁶ More, Thomas, *Utopia*, edited by Edward Surtz, S. J. and J. H. Hexter, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, pp. 72-74. Henceforth page numbers will be provided in the text in brackets.

⁷ Roper, p. 27.

⁸ Roper, p. 28.

to test his religious vocation.⁹ He subsequently left the Charterhouse because he feared he could not respect the vow of celibacy. In fact, he married Jane Colt, first daughter of a gentleman from Essex, who bore him four children. The couple moved to a house in Bucklesbury, where they remained until the purchase of a house in Chelsea in 1524.¹⁰

His first entrance into public service was as Member of Parliament under Henry VII at the time the King proposed a new tax to better finance his eldest daughter's marriage. More's son-in-law and biographer William Roper tells a significant anecdote on More's role during the Parliament's session. He opposed, Roper tells us, this heavy raise with such convincing arguments, that the King's personal requests were rejected entirely, a very sensational occurrence. When news of this newcomer who had sabotaged his proposal reached the ear of Henry VII, the monarch set out to get his revenge on More. As a result, John More was imprisoned in the Tower of London until his son paid a conspicuous fine.¹¹ It is a rather significant fact for two main reasons: first of all, we get a glimpse of More's brilliant mind and talent in the legal profession, since he was able to score a victory against the monarch himself thanks to his argumentation. Secondly, his falling out of favour with the King due to his moral integrity is an example of the man's courage when it came to the perilous dilemma of pleasing the ruler or acting for the common good. The death of Henry VII ended the problem of his aversion towards More. When he found himself opposing a King a second time, the situation would be much worse because of More's position at the Court and especially because of the nature of the question he opposed.

⁹ Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 16.

¹⁰ Firpo, p. 24.

¹¹ Roper, pp. 30-33.

After Henry VIII ascended the throne in 1509, More was chosen to represent the English faction during important negotiations with the city of Antwerp on behalf of the Company of Mercers. The following year, his reputation continued to grow and he was appointed under-sheriff of London. Besides his role in Parliament meetings under the new King, More was also meant to attend the municipal court as judge on different matters and he obtained a teaching position at the Lincoln's Inn.¹² In 1514 he reached the highest-ranking teaching position at Lincoln's Inn: "*Lent Reeder*" – someone elected annually to deliver lectures on a specific legal topic.¹³

Together with a brilliant career at court and as a lawyer, Thomas More cultivated the passion for the *studia humanitatis* throughout his life. In a prefatory letter to *Utopia*, addressed to his friend Pieter Gillis, More describes what his typical day looked like, stressing how little free time he had from his occupation. Therefore, he wrote, in order to read, study and write, "[his] own time is only what [he] steal[s] from sleeping and eating" (p. 65). His career always had to come first, especially after he became under-sheriff, as he writes to Gillis:

almost the whole day is devoted to other people's business and what's left over to my own; and then for myself - that is, studies - there's nothing left. (p. 66)

As previously mentioned, he first approached Latin at a young age and Greek during his Oxford years. His professors were two great English humanists: Thomas Linacre and William Grocyn. Linacre, who had been one of the first Englishmen to study Greek in Italy, contributed to bringing it back to England and taught it at Oxford to the likes of Prince Arthur and Queen Mary I.¹⁴ In fact, More was inspired and fascinated by the

¹² Firpo, p. 22.

¹³ Firpo, p. 25.

¹⁴ Ackroyd, p. 50.

humanist culture which shaped his works from the beginning.¹⁵ His “first entry into print”¹⁶ was a contribution to *Lac Puerorum*, printed in 1497, a work by John Hurt, who served as resident tutor for the young members in Cardinal Morton’s household at the time. It was a basic Latin grammar for young students that was conceived to help them to learn how to read, and young Thomas contributed with two Latin poems.¹⁷ In 1503 he composed *A Rueful Lamentation* after the death of the Queen and a few years later he translated into English the biography of Pico della Mirandola, a character that intrigued him very much, which was printed in London in 1510. Between 1512 and 1519 More composed the *History of Richard III*, which he never finished and was only published after his death. This book describes eloquently the dangers of letting a misruling Prince get away with their evil decisions: being governed by a tyrant can cost dearly both to the individual and the commonwealth.¹⁸ The value of this work lies more in its literary virtuosity modelled after classical examples, rather than on the accuracy of the events illustrated.¹⁹ This *History* figures among the sources of Richard’s ill-reputation and yet some have read it as an attack to tyranny in general rather than to the single figure of Richard. Notably, Shakespeare drew on this account of the monarch’s life copiously when composing his *Richard III*.²⁰

Another note-worthy work is the *Carmen Gratulatorium*, previously mentioned, that More composed for the coronation ceremony of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon in 1509. In the same year, More had an illustrious guest under his roof: Desiderius Erasmus, who composed his *Praise of Folly* in that very house.

¹⁵ Firpo, p. 20.

¹⁶ Ackroyd, p. 68.

¹⁷ Ackroyd, p. 69.

¹⁸ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> accessed on December 9, 2016.

¹⁹ Logan, George M., *The Meaning of More’s Utopia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 13.

²⁰ Logan, p. 14.

The friendship between these two remarkable humanists had begun years earlier. In June 1499 Erasmus reached England and paid a visit to the future Henry VIII accompanied by Thomas More. On that occasion, they both offered some Latin epigrams to the Prince and this encounter marked the beginning of their long-lasting and fruitful friendship.²¹ A few years later, in 1505, Erasmus had stayed at More's house for a short period during which they had both undertaken the task of translating Lucian, a classical author that both admired.²² More produced translations of a few works, including the *Κυνικός* and the *Τυραννοκτόνος*, which gained much popularity when they were published in 1506. Young More found in Lucian "his perfect match", especially in virtue of the saying about Lucian "ridentem dicere verum", a concept with a strong appeal to him, especially in the composition of *Utopia*.²³ More and Erasmus's collaboration in translating Lucian dialogues saw the former as a junior partner who completed four dialogues, versus the twenty-eight by Erasmus. This enterprise is quite significant for More's career, since working with Erasmus on Lucian had a considerable impact on the composition of *Utopia*. Besides helping More to have it first published, in fact, Erasmus also provided a somewhat *lucianesque* approach to *Utopia*: a book to be read "si quando voles ridere".²⁴ There is plenty of evidence of the sincere affection that bound More and Erasmus, among others the fact that More is the dedicatee of *The Praise of Folly*. A remarkable example of how fondly Erasmus thought of his friend is a letter to humanist Ulrich Von Hutten describing More to him. After depicting him as a devoted family man who never fails to perform his duty in the most excellent manner and a brilliant writer whose mind is comparable to no other in England, Erasmus concludes:

²¹ Ackroyd, pp. 78-80.

²² Firpo, p. 23.

²³ Ackroyd, pp. 90-91.

²⁴ Ackroyd, p. 91.

You have now before you an ill-drawn portrait, by a poor artist, of an excellent original! You will be still less pleased with the portrait, if you come to have closer acquaintance with More himself.²⁵

2.2 The Flanders Embassy: the Composition of *Utopia* and the prefatory Letter to Gillis

When Henry VIII ruled over England, the country flourished in the arts but also in trading. One of the main business partners of the kingdom was Flanders, and England maintained several trading relationships with it.²⁶ In 1515, Thomas More was chosen as one of the representatives for England in negotiations on the continent. His remarkable legal expertise brought him to the King's or to Cardinal Wolsey's attention and, as a result, he was sent to Bruges for a few months. He left England at the beginning of 1515 and travelled to Bruges, an important trading centre at the time.²⁷ Part of the same delegation was Cuthbert Tunstall, an influent member of Henry's court, a fine humanist and a skilled diplomat who had just obtained the Archdeaconate of Chester and would later become Master of the Rolls. Tunstall is also named in *Utopia* at the beginning of book 1, as part of the customary commendations of fellow humanists in one's work (p. 203). Unable to return to London, More took the chance to visit the town of Antwerp when negotiations had momentarily reached a deadlock. There, he was introduced to the town clerk Pieter Gillis, a friend of Erasmus and a fellow humanist, who hosted him at his house and provided him with useful contacts. This period was pivotal for More: the distance from his family and his daily occupations, combined with his impossibility to proceed in the negotiations, ended up being the ideal moment for his writing. In fact, More started

²⁵ *The Epistles of Erasmus*, vol. 3., Ed. Francis M. Nichols, New York: Russell and Russell, 1962, pp. 387-401.

²⁶ Ormrod, David, *The Rise of Commercial Empires: England and Netherlands in the Age of Mercantilism, 1650-1770*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 12-14.

²⁷ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> accessed on December 9, 2016.

composing *Utopia* in Antwerp, which is also the setting of the dialogue of book 1 and the frame for book 2. By the time he returned to England in autumn 1515, the draft of the second book was completed and he later added the first one.²⁸ The context in which *Utopia* came to life is significant, as are the sources that inspired and were useful to More during the composition.

After becoming Under-Sheriff of London (legal advisor to the Sheriff) in 1510, Thomas More experienced a fast rise in his career.²⁹ The fact that he was personally chosen to be part of the English embassy in Flanders meant that he had been noticed for his competence and knowledge. In fact, only a few years later he would be admitted in the King's Privy Council. Despite some claims by Erasmus, which depict More unwillingly joining the high spheres of the Tudor court, it cannot be overlooked how More's training – and also his abilities – were a perfect fit for a more political than merely scholastic profession.³⁰ As the very nature of *Utopia* suggests, for example, More's interest was inclined towards matters of public policy. His *History of Richard III*, taken simply as a treaty denouncing the effects of tyranny, is another proof of More's will to direct his attention not simply to scholarship but also to the world of English politics.³¹ The enthusiasm with which he firstly embraced his role as ambassador was slightly dampened when negotiations did not proceed smoothly, and yet his interest in matters of political life did not quiver. During the months he spent in Flanders he travelled extensively: firstly he met with Erasmus near Bruges, then he paid a visit to fellow humanist Jérôme Busleyden. A dear friend of Gillis and More, Busleyden received from

²⁸ Logan, 1984, p. 27.

²⁹ Roper, p. 33.

³⁰ *The Epistles of Erasmus*, vol. 3., ed. Francis M. Nichols, New York: Russell and Russell, 1962.

³¹ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> accessed on December 9, 2016.

the former the text of *Utopia* with a letter praising it and its author.³² Finally, in September 1515, he stayed with Pieter Gillis in Antwerp until he returned to England before the formal signing of the commercial treaty. These meetings are significant since all three humanists were involved in the crafting and publication of *Utopia*.

Thanks to the prefatory letters included in the different editions of *Utopia* (Leuven 1516, Paris 1517, Basel 1518), we know a great deal about the context in which More developed the idea for the island of Utopia or –as it was called in the first letters he sent Erasmus– *Nusquam*. The most prominent is More’s letter to Gillis which he sent together with the book itself. This letter is a perfect presentation of the work, alluding to the content of book 2, and entrusting it to Gillis for revision. It contains many standard humanist *topoi*, such as the claim that the book had been composed in unfavourable circumstances: only in the few hours that More took away from his sleep.³³ Erasmus himself had employed the same technique in the dedicatory letter of *The Praise of Folly*: he tells More how he wrote it on horseback.³⁴ Deprecation of one’s style is another typically humanist feature that More employs. It was a device meant specifically to highlight the “excellency of the style”.³⁵ In this case, however, More was worried that his Latin could not be up to the humanist level and dealt with this insecurity by claiming that Hythloday’s Latin was not very polished, since he was better acquainted with Greek. Therefore, since he was writing what he heard from him, it would have only been natural for the discourse to present some “unevenness”, as Erasmus pointed out in his letter to Ulrich Von Hutten.³⁶ One of the greatest merits of this letter is telling us what kind of

³² Firpo, pp. 56-60.

³³ Logan, 1984, p. 19.

³⁴ Erasmo, Desiderio, *Elogio della Follia*, edited by Carlo Carena, Torino: Einaudi, 2002, p. 5.

³⁵ Logan, 1984, p. 22.

³⁶ *The Epistles of Erasmus*, vol. 3., ed. Francis M. Nichols, New York: Russell and Russell, 1962.

readership *Utopia* was meant for. In fact, More implicitly suggests the “range of learning we need in order to be adequate readers”³⁷, which includes, it goes without saying, a great familiarity with classics.

In addition to that, the use of Greek names is worth analysing, since it discloses a different level in the interpretation of the book and, more importantly, points out what type of reader could get to such a deeper level. The typical difference in taste between humanists and common people is addressed in the letter to Gillis: while the former are receptive to refined humour and witticisms, the latter are unappreciative of such things.³⁸ However, it is not merely a question of personal taste, since a sensational aspect of *Utopia* goes by unnoticed at the eyes of people who have no knowledge in Greek. Calling an island Non-place, its river Without-Water and so on, gives a totally different perspective on the work in its entirety. In the prefatory letter, More does not mention the name of the island, nor Raphael’s surname (which translates to Expert-in-lies), until he has described in detail the circumstances of his encounter with Hythloday himself.³⁹ In addition to that, he describes two real life characters, Pieter Gillis and More’s secretary John Clement, who were both actually present in Antwerp at the time the meeting allegedly took place. After establishing the facts narrated in the book simply as a recording of things More himself saw and heard, he goes on to undermine the reality of it all by revealing the Greek names that state the opposite. In a significant passage of the letter, More asks Gillis to help him with a doubt that has grown in him about a detail in Raphael’s account. He says that his secretary John disagrees with him on the length of a bridge across the river *Anydrus* and begs Gillis to clarify the truth by asking *Hythodaeus* directly, were he ever

³⁷ Logan, 1984, p. 23.

³⁸ Firpo, pp. 54-55.

³⁹ Logan, 1984, p. 29.

to get the chance of speaking to him again.⁴⁰ To the unerudite reader this is simply a circumstantial evidence that the meeting in Antwerp did happen, it seems the only reasonable cause for stating such a trivial detail, and that someone named Raphael Hythloday actually exists. To the humanist who knows Greek, however, it is presented as a dispute about a river with no water described by someone who is excellent at telling lies. This could also be read as More's affirmation of the fact that, to be erudite, one must know Greek in addition to Latin. Up to that point, if we exclude the title, which obviously gives away the truth of Utopia's inexistence, the reader could have believed they were simply looking at another traveller's chronicle, a genre that was common at the time, due to the travels of Columbus and De Gama and others.⁴¹ More went as far in his deception as to use the name of Vespucci, writing that Raphael had discovered Utopia after abandoning one of the explorer's expeditions. This "careful establishment of verisimilitude"⁴² was also advocated by Erasmus in his *De copia*, a manual on how to rephrase a pre-existing text published in 1512, where he stated that "if entirely fictional narratives are introduced as if they were true because they will help us to get our point across, we must make them as much like the real thing as possible".⁴³ The technique employed in the prefatory letter (and throughout the whole book) is remarkable: More seems to use as many details as possible to describe what apparently are true events, only to use those very details to undermine the verisimilitude of it all, and this verisimilitude is "undercut even as it is established, so that the fiction mocks its own pretense of factuality"⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ Logan, p. 29.

⁴¹ Firpo, Luigi, "Introduzione", in Thomas More, *Utopia*, Naples: Guida Editori, 2000, p. 18.

⁴² Logan, 1984, p. 30.

⁴³ Erasmus, Desiderius, *De copia*, edited by Craig R. Thompson, Betty I. Knott and Brian McGregor, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1978, p. 634.

⁴⁴ Logan, 1984, p. 29.

Logan chooses these elaborate techniques, among other factors, as the cues that *Utopia* was conceived by More as a book for humanists. Due to the different interpretations that have been given to *Utopia* since its first publication in 1516, it is truly difficult to catalogue it. Many placed it in the tradition of *specula principum*, the mirrors-for-princes advice books.⁴⁵ These books, however, were becoming outdated at the time, since a “modern positive theory” was emerging.⁴⁶ It would be wrong moreover, Logan argues, to confine *Utopia* to this genre, for two main reasons. First of all, because of the content of book 2: many practices of the Utopians simply do not correspond to humanist ideals and could therefore not be what a humanist would try to suggest. Secondly, since *Utopia* is addressed to humanists, it would not make much sense to describe a list of good behaviour and attitudes to adopt to a readership that was already familiar with them, making *Utopia* a mere reiteration of such principles.⁴⁷ As previously stated, *Utopia* is difficult to catalogue and, before attempting to do so, it will be useful to analyse the content of the book in relation with the life of the author.

2.3 Becoming Lord Chancellor

Utopia was a successful book from the start. After the first edition in December 1516, it was reprinted three more times in the following two years. The original edition of *Utopia* was enriched by many letters written by More and other humanists to one another, commenting on the content of the book and, sometimes, adding original creations.⁴⁸ It is

⁴⁵ Petrina, Alessandra, “La prosa: da Malory alle traduzioni della Bibbia”, in Michele Stanco, ed., *La Letteratura Inglese dall’Umanesimo al Rinascimento*, Roma: Carocci editore, 2016, p. 89.

⁴⁶ Logan, 1984, p. 24.

⁴⁷ Logan, 1984, pp. 24-25.

⁴⁸ The corpus of letters surrounding *Utopia* is collected in the same volume of the Yale edition of More’s works.

the case, for example, of Gillis's appendix on Utopian alphabet that Gillis included in a letter to Jérôme Busleyden. Gillis invented this alphabet and wrote a short poem by the fictional Utopian author Anemolius which, despite its little artistic value, is a remarkable sign of how great an impact *Utopia* had on its public.⁴⁹ The readership of *Utopia* has briefly been discussed already and will be dealt with in detail in another section, but it seems important to underline here that More's masterpiece did make a relevant impact at the time of its publication.

After his return from the Flanders embassy, More proceeded to the composition of book I of *Utopia*, the so-called *Dialogue of Counsel*, in the first months of 1516. In June, he received the title of legal advisor for the Commission for Bread Ration of London.⁵⁰ At that time, Erasmus visited London again and was More's guest. Shortly after his return to the Netherlands, he received the complete text of *Utopia* from More, still bearing the original title of *Nusquama*. In fact, Erasmus had expressed his interest in the book in a letter he sent to More (p. 26). Thanks to Erasmus's patronage, *Utopia* was first published in Leuven in December 1516 by Dirk Martens. This first edition also included More's letter to Gillis, Gillis's Utopian alphabet and poem and beautiful woodcuts representing the island of Utopia by Hans Holbein.⁵¹ At the beginning of 1517 More was once again bound to leave England on a diplomatic mission. He went to Calais to represent London in a dispute on piracy and that provided the occasion for *Utopia*'s second edition: Thomas Lupset was the editor and Gilles de Gourmont printed it in Paris in the autumn of 1517. At the end of the year, More returned to London. 1518 was a

⁴⁹ Allen, Peter R., "Utopia and European Humanism: The Function of the Prefatory Letters and Verses", in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 10 (1963), pp. 98-99.

⁵⁰ Firpo, p. 25.

⁵¹ Roberts, Jane, *Holbein and the Court of Henry VIII: Drawings and Miniatures from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle*, Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 1993, p. 61.

pivotal year in More's career: the final edition of *Utopia* appeared in Basel, thanks to Johann Froben. This edition also included More's *Epigrammata* for the first time on print. Most importantly however, 1518 was the year More officially entered the service of the King. In that year, Erasmus wrote a letter to his friend, expressing his resentment for More's progressive distancing from the letters and his friends, due to his new role at court.⁵² In fact, More gave up his title of Under Sheriff to devote his time to the Privy Council, the formal body of advisors of the King. Nonetheless, Erasmus painted a flattering portrait of his friend in another letter –to Ulrich von Hutten– praising *Utopia*. In 1520 More accompanied Henry VIII to Dover to meet Emperor Charles V to renovate some commercial treaties and, later that year, to meet King Francis I of France. Once again on the continent, he was assigned to a mission to stipulate commercial treaties with the Anseatic countries.⁵³ He took the chance to visit Erasmus once more in Bruges, where he also met Valencia-born Juan Luis Vives, who was professor of humanities at the University of Leuven. Vives, a fellow humanist, is also linked to the Tudor court: he wrote a commentary on Saint Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* dedicated to Henry VIII. Consequently, he was invited to the English court as Princess Mary's tutor until he fell out of the King's favour on the question of the annulment and retired to Bruges.⁵⁴

After returning to England again, More became Chancellor of the Exchequer (responsible for all the economic matters of the kingdom) and Under-Treasurer of England.⁵⁵ The same year Thomas More was also knighted: from that moment he was allowed to wear the golden Chain of Office⁵⁶ and the Plantagenet Rose represented in

⁵² Allen, p. 94.

⁵³ Grafton, Anthony and Jardine, Lisa, *From Humanism to the Humanities*, London: Duckworth, 1986, p. 168.

⁵⁴ Grafton and Jardine, p. 140.

⁵⁵ Guy, John, Alexander, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980, p. 122.

⁵⁶ The chain was essentially a mark of fealty, symbol of the allegiance to the monarch.

Hans Holbein's famous portrait.⁵⁷ His eldest daughter Margaret married William Roper, a young lawyer that would become the first biographer of More. Due to Roper's proximity to More, his biography is enriched with many anecdotes about the life of his father-in-law that help understand some of the private features of his personality. About More's relationship with the King, Roper wrote that it was very intimate, so much that Henry frequently asked for his company after his evening prayers simply to discuss astronomy, geography or theology. Sometime they even discussed politics, even though More was still a simple member of the Privy Council and not yet his closest advisor.⁵⁸ Roper also reported that the Queen enjoyed More's company as well, since the royal couple was used to send for him after the Council had dined. More himself at some point realised that he was spending so much of his time at court that he barely saw his family anymore. He had to resort to an unconventional expedient to get out of this situation: trying to become less brilliant and pleasant in his conversation, so that Henry would release him earlier or not call for him at all.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, Henry remained so fond of More that sometimes he would just show up unannounced at More's house in Chelsea and one time he spent an hour walking around the garden arm in arm with him. Roper recalled such an event as a further proof of the monarch's personal liking of Thomas More, due not only to the lawyer's brilliant mind and vast knowledge, but also to his personality. Roper wrote that, after the King had left, he approached his father-in-law and told him how fortunate he was to be held in such high opinion by a notoriously fastidious monarch. More's disenchanted reply was:

⁵⁷ Roberts, p. 72.

⁵⁸ Guy, p. 166.

⁵⁹ Roper, pp. 36-37.

I find his majesty to be an excellent master to me [...] and yet, my dear son Roper, I can honestly tell you I have no reason to be proud of this because, if my head could win him a castle in France, it should not fail to go.⁶⁰

Anecdotes such as this prove that More was aware of how precarious his position was even before his role as Chancellor.

Besides being the King's favourite conversation partner, his "pet humanist"⁶¹, More was also entrusted by Henry with high-responsibility roles. This was the cause of many disagreements between him and then-Lord Chancellor Cardinal Wolsey.⁶² Roper wrote that Wolsey tried to talk Henry into sending More to Spain as an ambassador to be rid of him at court for a while. The reason for this was that More had opposed one of Wolsey's tax proposals in Parliament so fiercely and convincingly that the other members had withdrawn their support to the Cardinal.⁶³ Therefore, Wolsey had allegedly commented in a letter: "I wish you had been in Rome, Master More, when I made you Speaker of the Chamber!"⁶⁴ When Henry communicated his decision to follow Wolsey's advice and send him to Spain, More replied that, even though he would certainly suffer a lot due to the weather, he would go to Spain if his King wished so. Upon hearing such words, Henry would not send such a close advisor to a harmful destination and thus he chose someone else to be part of the embassy.⁶⁵

The years leading up to More's Chancellorship were far from uneventful at the English court. After the death of Pope Leo X, the vacancy at the Holy See had Cardinal Wolsey getting his hopes up about becoming the head of the Catholic Church.⁶⁶ His most

⁶⁰ Roper, p. 44.

⁶¹ Greenblatt, p. 21.

⁶² Guy, p. 146.

⁶³ Roper, pp. 40-44.

⁶⁴ Roskell, J., S., *The Commons and their Speakers in English Parliaments, 1376-1532*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965, p. 59.

⁶⁵ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> accessed on December 9, 2016.

⁶⁶ Gwyn, Peter, J., *The King's Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of Thomas Wolsey*, London: Pimlico, 2002, p. 432.

treacherous opponent proved to be Emperor Charles of the Holy Roman Empire who was the main supporter of the future Pope Hadrian VI. Wolsey's disappointment was one of the reasons behind his decision to give his support to the monarch, who was beginning to show a stronger and stronger desire to separate from Catherine of Aragon.⁶⁷ The King's first wife, in fact, was Emperor Charles's aunt. Despite being already involved with Ann Boleyn, Henry was pushed by Wolsey to consider the King of France's daughter as a possible new bride: an alliance would be made with France, not only a powerful country, but also one of the Emperor's greatest rivals. All of this was partly possible due to some anomaly surrounding Henry's marriage to Catherine in the first place.⁶⁸ As previously stated, Catherine was Arthur's widow, and Henry had needed a special Papal Brief to legitimise their union. Together with her failure in giving a male heir to the English throne, this was another official excuse for the King to express his determination to divorce Catherine and marry Ann.⁶⁹ When Henry first approached More officially on the matter, however, it was to seek his advice based on what the Scriptures said. In the Old Testament, in fact, marrying one's dead brother's wife is forbidden in more than one passage.⁷⁰ More apologetically replied that it was a question to be brought to a theologian's attention, not a lawyer's.⁷¹ Unfortunately, the monarch became rather insistent on the subject and demanded a response from More. His orders were also that More reached out, if necessary, to Tunstall (bishop of Durham) or John Clark⁷² (bishop

⁶⁷ Gwyn, p. 433.

⁶⁸ Russel, Conrad, *The Crisis of Parliaments. English History 1509-1660*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 142-144.

⁶⁹ Brigden, Susan, *New World, Lost Worlds. The Rule of the Tudors, 1485-1603*, London: The Penguin Press, 2000, pp. 158-160.

⁷⁰ *Leviticus*, XVIII, 16 and XX, 21.

⁷¹ Roper, p. 53.

⁷² Clark was the one who presented Pope Leo X with the *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* written by Henry VIII, which earned the monarch the title of *Defensor fidei*.

of Bath). After a long period of deliberation, More replied to the King that it would have been inappropriate for him to agree with an annulment of the marriage, basing his position on writings by Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine among others. Nonetheless, he explained his position with such diplomacy that, despite being crossed by More's reply, Henry did not hold any grudge against him yet and momentarily put the question aside. And neither did he stop trusting More: in fact, in 1527, the monarch sent More to France to join delicate peace negotiations.⁷³

The relationships with the continent were rather complex during those years. The dominance of Emperor Charles V had forced England to seek an alliance with France, one that More and Tunstall were sent to negotiate. During the celebrations in London for said treaty, however, imperialist mercenary troops broke into the city of Rome in a bloody act that is remembered as the Sack of Rome.⁷⁴ Many citizens were tortured and butchered and the Pope was made a prisoner. The fact that England had just signed a treaty against the Empire that had captured the Pope constituted a problem for Henry's annulment plans and, by extension, for the man he had entrusted this mission to: Cardinal Wolsey. This failure in politics cost the Cardinal a great portion of the King's favour and eventually led to his replacement.⁷⁵ In fact, since the Pope was held captive by Catherine's nephew, the chances he would grant Henry what he needed to separate from her were rather poor.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, Henry proceeded with his negotiations with the Vatican, which sent Cardinal Campeggio as a representative. In the spring of 1529, in the Parliament Chambers at Blackfriars, Henry and Catherine faced the first session of the long process

⁷³ Firpo, p. 28.

⁷⁴ Brigden, p. 159.

⁷⁵ Gwyn, p. 436.

⁷⁶ Kelly, Henry Ansgar, *The Matrimonial Trials of Henry VIII*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976, pp. 114-115.

that would end in their separation.⁷⁷ Unlike his friend John Fisher, who acted as one of Catherine's main supporters,⁷⁸ More participated to the process only in part. In fact, he was soon sent by Henry to Cambrai instead of Wolsey, who needed to remain in London to sort out the King's Great Matter.⁷⁹

The King's orders were that England came out of the Cambrai negotiations as a winner, with no cuts to the imperial debts owed to the kingdom.⁸⁰ Trading deals with the Netherlands was another element that should not be neglected by the negotiators, since it was one of the most fruitful partners for England.⁸¹ More and Tunstall, as skilled diplomats, were entrusted with the task of maintaining England "in a high place in the game of nations".⁸² Upon succeeding in the negotiations, which established peaceful conditions that would last over a decade, the ambassadors returned to London, where the situation had started to fall apart. Cardinal Campeggio had in fact established that the question of Henry's annulment would be moved to Rome, which meant Cardinal Wolsey had failed. The King decided to depose Wolsey and appoint a new Lord Chancellor, the highest-ranking title at court. With what could be seen also as an assertive political power-manoeuve, Henry chose a layman as his successor and, on 25 October 1529, Thomas More received the Great Seal.⁸³

⁷⁷ Kelly, p. 117.

⁷⁸ Ackroyd, p. 259.

⁷⁹ Guy, p. 167.

⁸⁰ Ackroyd, p. 268.

⁸¹ Ormrod, p. 16.

⁸² Ackroyd, p. 269.

⁸³ Guy, p. 188.

2.4 The wrath of the King means death⁸⁴

At the court of Henry VIII, all power lay in the hands of the King, every decision depended entirely on his will. Such an absolute power, linked to the personality of the monarch rather than to the institution of the monarchy, meant that there was one essential thing to do for courtiers. In order to flourish – even to survive sometimes – at court people had to get the King's favour. Noblemen were in constant competition to obtain a place in Henry's inner circle of friends, admirers and councillors and the ruler's favourable judgement was coveted by them all.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, it was not easily gained, and it was even more difficult to maintain. Cardinal Wolsey, for example, rapidly lost all his credit with Henry due to his failure in the Divorce question. The years of the King's Great Matter actually cost many courtiers even worse prices than Wolsey, who was stripped of his title and properties: the most common punishment was death by hanging.⁸⁶ One of the most notable victims of Henry's ruthlessness was his trusted Lord Chancellor More.

Throughout his presence at court, More had conducted himself with great diplomacy. He had managed to preserve his integrity without grovelling at Henry's feet: his intelligence, personality and his value as man of the law (together with the recommendations and past patronage of influential people like Cardinal Morton) had granted him access to the King's inner circle. His public persona might have been quite distant from his true personality, but at least for most of his public career, he was perfectly able to keep the latter to himself and his family.⁸⁷ He was liked by Henry and the feeling was mutual even beyond a relationship of mere sovereignty: his duty to the King was

⁸⁴ Roper, p. 83.

⁸⁵ Brigden, pp. 144-145.

⁸⁶ Gwyn, pp. 486-488.

⁸⁷ Greenblatt, pp. 15-16.

second only to his duty to God. What determined More's end was, however, that as Lord Chancellor he had to be Henry's servant first and foremost. Up to the point of More's Chancellorship, he had had a hard time and yet had managed to live with his personal contempt for the court's display of opulence, conspicuous waste of money and aggressive attitude in foreign politics that sprouted from Henry's natural disposition (though unarguably fostered by advisors such as Cromwell and Wolsey).⁸⁸ More's private self was as distant as possible from all the Tudor court had come to represent, due partly to his personality but mostly to his devotion. As previously stated, in fact, More had seriously considered the prelacy, and had maintained a somewhat ascetic disposition notwithstanding his marriage and public career.⁸⁹ Numerous descriptions of Holbein's famous portrait of More state that, under the official elegant garments and the golden chain of St. Andrew, he wore a hair shirt, symbolising a constant reminder that all earthly things are destined to fade and men should not become too attached to them.⁹⁰ This exemplifies a concept that Stephen Greenblatt reprised in the first chapter of his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*: the duality of More's personality, where his true identity was kept hidden in favour of a public role that he played as if he was an actor on stage, as a sort of estrangement, that also meant his life was safe.⁹¹ The reasons for this are not to be simplified: it must always be kept in mind that survival at Henry's court was all but granted, even for those who orbited close to the King. More was also the head of a very numerous family, and his household largely depended on him. Despite all this, eventually

⁸⁸ Mayer, Thomas, F., "On the road to 1534: the Occupation of Tournai and Henry VIII's Theory of Sovereignty", in Hoak, Dale, *Tudor Political Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1995, p. 13.

⁸⁹ Firpo, p. 11.

⁹⁰ Firpo, p. 12.

⁹¹ Greenblatt, p. 27.

came a time when Thomas More decided he could no longer serve his King, since he was acting against the faith in the Catholic Church.

Even though at first he experienced failure, Henry VIII was determined to obtain the divorce from Catherine of Aragorn and to marry Ann Boleyn. Before breaking with the Catholic Church, Henry knew all too well that he needed to win at least part of his people's support: the majority still stood with Catherine and the risk of a rebellion was one he could not afford.⁹² The years from 1530 to 1533 in England were marked with uncertainty, the king made cautious steps to further his aim, with the support of Cromwell, one of his closest advisors, especially after More's resignation.⁹³ On the other hand, some drastic measures were also adopted to scare the population away from a public declaration of the King as a heretic, a tyrant, a usurper: as of 1534, those who thus spoke would be charged with treason and executed.⁹⁴ Before that, a draft of this treaty had been made in 1530, blaming as traitors those who swore allegiance to a foreign prince, and that included the Pope, proving to be unfaithful to the King of England. The aim of such a law was to prevent any rebellion when the breaking with Rome would eventually take place.

After being approached by the King on the question of the annulment the first time, More hoped he would be left out of said question for good. He dedicated a few years to the composition of several religious works and let the monarch deal with the delegation from Rome. Nonetheless, it was not realistic that the highest-ranking courtier and the closest advisor to the King could avoid the Great Matter forever. In fact, the Lord Chancellor was dragged into Henry's dispute with the Holy See by the monarch's insistence. The King wanted More to peruse the Scriptures to find arguments to support

⁹² It should be noted that Henry VII claim to the English throne at the end of the War of the Roses was not solid enough to prevent accusations of illegitimacy.

⁹³ Russel, pp. 148-150.

⁹⁴ Russel, p. 151.

his claim of an illegitimate marriage to his brother's widow and also to his right to marry another woman. Roper writes that More, kneeling before Henry VIII, begged him to release him from such a task. His motivations, according to Roper, were thus expressed: he found it an impossible task to comply to His Majesty's will without acting against his own conscience, which told him such an idea was not acceptable to the Catholic faith.⁹⁵ More importantly, the Lord Chancellor also added that his actions always followed the good words the King had bestowed upon him when he was appointed member of the Privy Council. Indeed, Henry had allegedly told More to always think about God first, and then about his King.⁹⁶ More also made sure to renew his fidelity to the monarch and his sincere will to serve him with even greater zeal than before on any other matter he wished him to. Even though this seemed to be enough for Henry for a while, it was only a temporary relief. Continuous pressures upon More to speak his mind on the Great Matter forced him to take a drastic decision. When he was summoned with other members of the Parliament and bishops to hand in his depositions, he did not show up. He called for his dear friend, the Duke of Norfolk, and asked him to intercede on his behalf with the King so that he could resign from his Chancellorship. On 16 May 1532, Thomas More officially abandoned his title and returned the Great Seal to Henry VIII.⁹⁷ More's income was drastically reduced and this brought him great concern due to his numerous family. He frequently discussed with his family the joys of the afterlife in Heaven, the lives of saints and martyrdom. He probably sensed what was to come, since he praised those who endured prison and death for the love of God. He used to tell his son and daughters, Roper writes, that death would have been more welcome to him if he was encouraged by his

⁹⁵ Elton, G. R., *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government, Vol. III: Papers and Reviews 1973-1981*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 146-147.

⁹⁶ Roper, p. 66.

⁹⁷ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> accessed on December 9, 2016.

loved ones to embrace it for a good cause.⁹⁸ One day he received a visit at his Chelsea house from Thomas Cromwell, who had become one of the King's most trusted advisors and his main partner in the dissolution of the monasteries.⁹⁹ More's words to Cromwell, as reported by Roper, are an echo of what the character Morus had said in the *Dialogue of Counsel*, book 1 of *Utopia* (pp. 87-103). More advised Cromwell to always counsel the King and tell him what he should do, not what was in his power to do, for a ruler who comes to believe his power has no boundaries is impossible to guide, let alone control.¹⁰⁰

The man Henry chose to make a decision on the Great Matter was Thomas Cranmer, Bishop of Canterbury. Since he had been the chaplain of the Boleyn family, Cranmer had easily agreed to celebrate the marriage between Henry and Ann Boleyn at the beginning of 1533, when the bride was already pregnant with the future Queen Elizabeth. He also annulled Henry's first marriage, despite pope Clement VII's refusal to accept said annulment.¹⁰¹ In February 1534, the official separation from Rome took place, and preparations for the coronation of Ann Boleyn began. Thomas More received a letter from the bishops of Bath, Winchester and Durham inviting him to the ceremony but he did not show up. Upon meeting them, he defended his position with an eloquent anecdote:

[there was] an emperor who ordained a law that whosoever had committed a certain heinous offence [...], except it were a virgin, should suffer the pains of death such a reverence had he to virginity. Now so it happened that the first committer of that offence was indeed a virgin, [...] [but the emperor] would fain have had that law put in execution. Whereupon when his council had sat long, [...] suddenly rose there up one of his council [...] and said 'Why make you so much ado, my lords, about so small a matter? Let her first be deflowered, and then after may she be devoured. And so though your lordships have in the matter of the matrimony hitherto kept yourselves pure virgins, yet take good heed, my lords, that you keep your virginity still. For some there be that by procuring your lordships first at the coronation to be present, and next to preach for the setting forth of it, and finally to write books to all the world in defence thereof are desirous to deflower you, and- when they have deflowered you, then will they not fail soon after to devour you. Now, my

⁹⁸ Roper, p. 71.

⁹⁹ Brigden, p. 280.

¹⁰⁰ Roper, pp. 71-72.

¹⁰¹ Elton, p. 201.

Lords, [...] it lieth not in my power but that they may devour me, but God being my good Lord, I will so provide that they shall never deflower me'.¹⁰²

Henry was adamant in his decision to bring More to his side and began to use threats. Around the same time, John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, was experiencing a similar misfortune for the same reason: he refused to swear the Oath of Supremacy, which invested the English ruler with the sovereignty over the church as well. Furthermore, Fisher had been the only man of the church to openly stand with Catherine throughout the trial and was therefore sentenced to the scaffold.¹⁰³ Before his execution, however, he was made Cardinal by the Pope, a fact that infuriated Henry. The enraged monarch allegedly commented that Cardinal Fisher would have to wear his cardinal hat on his shoulders, for he would not have a head for much longer.¹⁰⁴ With More, the King proceeded in a different manner. He tried to implicate the former Lord Chancellor in a case of treason committed by a nun, whose mystic visions condemned the divorce from Catherine.¹⁰⁵ He sent a small party including the new Lord Chancellor Thomas Audley and Cromwell to persuade More to accept the Oath of Supremacy. More, however, after reasserting his devotion to the King and his heartfelt gratitude for all the benefits received from His Majesty, refused to give his answer once again, to which his friend the Duke of Norfolk replied with a warning: "The wrath of the King means death".¹⁰⁶

At the time of the Act of Supremacy, More was summoned to Lambeth Palace, the residency of the Bishop of London, with all the ministers of London and Westminster.¹⁰⁷ They had to appear before the Lord Chancellor, the Bishop of Canterbury

¹⁰² Roper, pp. 73-74.

¹⁰³ Kelly, p. 142.

¹⁰⁴ See note 56 in Roper, p. 75.

¹⁰⁵ Kelly, p. 155.

¹⁰⁶ Roper, p. 83.

¹⁰⁷ Firpo, p. 13.

and the Secretary Cromwell to swear the Oath of Supremacy, recognising the King's marriage to Ann Boleyn and the authority of Henry over the Church in England.¹⁰⁸ That morning, after the confession, he bid farewell to his family in the house, unlike his usual custom of being accompanied to the boat. On the boat, he confided his son-in-law Roper, who was to accompany him to Lambeth Palace: "My dear son, [...] the battle is won".¹⁰⁹ Indeed his love for God had made him so strong as to resist to all his earthly affections and as to refuse to take the Oath of Supremacy. More was soon entrusted to the care of the abbot of Westminster, while decisions were made on his situation. After four days of consultations with the Council and also due to the pressures of Ann Boleyn, the King decided that swearing the Oath of Supremacy was a necessity for More to avoid the execution.¹¹⁰ He was locked in the Tower of London and, after a month, he received visits from his eldest daughter Margaret and later from his second wife Alice. Neither his daughter's pain nor his wife's attempt to talk him into taking the Oath managed to change More's resolution. His wife in particular tried to persuade him to follow the example of all the Bishops and courtiers who had bowed to the Oath, so as to be able to return to his beautiful house, his rich library and his beloved family. She considered his refusal to obey simply as madness.¹¹¹ However, More's sentence came through mainly due to Richard Rich's false testimony: the King's solicitor-general in fact paid an unofficial visit to the Tower of London and talked to More. Later on, he reported what More had said with significant alterations, resulting in the sentencing for treason and death by hanging, despite More's incisive confutation of what Rich was declaring.¹¹² On the morning of 6

¹⁰⁸ Walker, Greg, *Writing under Tyranny*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 235.

¹⁰⁹ Roper, p. 84.

¹¹⁰ Walker, p. 236.

¹¹¹ Elton, p. 345.

¹¹² Elton, p. 200.

July 1535, More received news from the King via Thomas Pope: he was to be executed that same day before nine. More's words were of obedience and of gratitude for the King for having released him so soon from earthly sufferings and his only demand was that his daughter Margaret would be granted the possibility to attend his burial.¹¹³ His sentence had been converted to beheading, as an act of respect from the King, instead of the longer process of hanging. Moments before his death, Roper writes, Thomas More asked the people witnessing his sacrifice to pray for him and remember that he was dying for the faith of the Catholic Church.

News of the death of John Fisher and Thomas More travelled fast around the European courts thanks to letters by privates and diplomats. The Pope was furious, especially since he had just made Fisher a Cardinal, and the assassination of two defenders of the Catholic faith was another clear sign of the irreversible fracture between the English Church and Rome. Thomas More was beatified by Pope Leo XIII in 1886 and, together with Cardinal Fisher and other English martyrs, was later canonised by Pius XI on the 400th anniversary of his death, on 6 July 1935. Nowadays, Saint Thomas More is celebrated every 9th of July.¹¹⁴

My insistence on describing in detail the life of the author of *Utopia* is justified by different reasons. First of all, Thomas More was one of the most important characters orbiting around Henry at the Tudor court: his remarkable personality and intelligence granted him a privileged position to see and experience in the first person how Henry VIII ruled the kingdom. This is directly linked to the detailed description More made of England and its society in book 1 of *Utopia* and also, by painting a picture with the

¹¹³ Roper, pp. 103-105.

¹¹⁴ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> accessed on December 9, 2016.

opposite tones, in book 2. His deep understanding of political affairs and power-games is evident in the *Dialogue of Counsel*, while his critique on society is subtle and hidden in a complex game of allusions and the use of Greek names. What is undisputable is that Thomas More understood how England was at his time and was able to produce an innovative and, for some aspects, even foretelling piece of socio-political critique.¹¹⁵ Another important reason for learning more about his life involves his cultural background and his education. Listing all the works that could have inspired More in creating *Utopia* would take up too much time, and yet there are some links between his education and the contents of his masterpiece that are too evident to be ignored. More's affinity with the *studia humanitatis* is reflected in *Utopia* in many aspects that will be analysed further on, such as the use of the Greek language. Thomas More's interest in the works of Lucian and his translation efforts in partnership with Erasmus must be highlighted when writing about *Utopia*. In fact, without knowing how More was fascinated by the *lucianesque* concept of the "ridentem dicere verum", an entire and game-changing layer of meaning of *Utopia* would be lost to the understanding of many.¹¹⁶ Finally, the main object of this thesis is strictly connected with the events of More's life. It could be argued that, since *Utopia* was published at the beginning of More's career at the Tudor court, some twenty years before his execution, it could be unnecessary to analyse the period after 1516. On the contrary, one of the main key points used in this thesis is that of comparing the concepts and ideas expressed in the *Dialogue of Counsel* to the actual decisions More made when dealing with Henry VIII first as his ambassador, then as member of the Privy Council and, most importantly, as his Lord Chancellor. The

¹¹⁵ Logan, pp. 74-76.

¹¹⁶ Ackroyd, pp. 90-91.

Question of Servitude is the topic of this thesis in the sense that *Utopia* does not give us with a clean-cut solution, while More's own life provides us with a synthesis of Morus and Hythloday's positions, almost as a sort of ending to the debate in the dialogue. Book 1 of *Utopia* is then used here as a prism through which a reflection is made about the true utility of humanists advising their monarch, a reflection made by a man who, after twenty years of living according to one position, sacrificed his life in the name of that integrity and conscience advocated by the opposite position.

3. *Utopia*

3.1 Context, sources and plot

Even people who are not familiar with English Renaissance literature nor with the history of the Tudor court can undoubtedly recognise the word *utopia*. Indeed, it has become a commonly used word, one that can be found in dictionaries and refers to “an imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect, especially in respect of social structure, laws, and politics”.¹ Furthermore, after the publication of *Utopia*, many authors have drawn their inspiration from it, and a new literary genre, utopian literature, was established.² Writers belonging to the centuries closely following More’s have produced several examples of said literature, Tommaso Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (published in 1602) being among the most famous.³ But this tradition also continues in the contemporary era, and is so popular that it has even generated a sub-genre, dystopian literature, which finds one of its most illustrious exponents in George Orwell, author of *1984*.⁴ This is evidence of the great impact Thomas More’s *libellus aureus* had not only on contemporary society, but on modern literature and common language as well. The legacy of *Utopia* is still relevant nowadays, because it answers a need that is common to humankind throughout history: the desire to conceive a perfect world, deeply in contrast with the real world we live in. It is also a valuable thinking exercise: learning about the perfect and yet inexistent Utopian society can motivate the readers to consider pressing issues in their own real and imperfect world.

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, sub voce.

² Sargent, Lyman, Tower, *British and American Utopian Literature, 1516-1985*, New York: Garland, 1988, p. 30.

³ Firpo, 21.

⁴ Baldini, Artemio Enzo, *Utopia e Distopia*, Milano: F. Angeli, 1987, p. 54.

In addition to its valuable content, which explores many areas of human practices and spurs the minds of the readers to reflect on society, *Utopia* is also very much a product of its time. When taking into consideration the historical and literary frame of its composition and cross-referencing it with the life of its author, the uniqueness of the product is evident. First of all, the underlying idea of this book sprouts from Humanism. Indeed, *Utopia* is a reflection on human values and human society, which were two of the main concerns for humanists.⁵ By describing an ideal society and its values, More was also advocating another important humanist principle: the perfectibility of human beings.⁶ Its readership was also comprised of More's fellow humanists: the choice of writing in Latin and using Greek names suggest so, and the fact is confirmed by the thick epistolary corpus surrounding *Utopia*. Erasmus, Gillis, Busleyden and others were discussing it among themselves and praising one or the other aspect in lengthy written accounts they would send to friends and acquaintances, provided they too were humanists. The style itself points to the works of other humanists, such as Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, a style that was modelled after classical authors. The use of paradoxes – such as the man-eating sheep (p. 67) –, irony and the *exempla* confirm the author's classical training and passion for the *studia humanitatis*.⁷

Secondly, the historical context is almost as vital to this work as its content. When More conceived *Utopia* in 1515, Europe was torn by tyrannical rulers and runaway

⁵ Logan, George M., *The Meaning of More's Utopia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 45-47.

⁶ Carroll, Clare, "Humanism and English Literature in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries", in Jill Kraye, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 246.

⁷ Skinner, Quentin, "Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and the language of Renaissance Humanism", in Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 50-53.

landlordism⁸ and the contrast with the ideal island where people live soberly, equally and in harmony with nature could not have been clearer. For example, a direct critique is made with regards to European kingdoms which then possessed standing armies, such as France (p. 65). When analysed in detail though, it is England *Utopia* is referring to. Book 1 provides a direct connection with More's native land, when Hythloday discusses and criticises the practice of sentencing thieves to death (p. 61 and p. 73) and enclosures (p. 69) in the context of a fictional gathering at Cardinal Morton's. Book 2, however, also mirrors Henry VIII's kingdom, by means of describing a land that is so similar and yet so opposite.⁹ When taking a closer look to the few and summary geographical data that Hythloday provides in his description of the island, it is possible to recognise England thanks to the diameter, the presence of a major river and the fact it is an island. What More does in the second book, is to create a mirror image of England, situated somewhere in the Austral hemisphere, where all the social plagues affecting the original island do not belong at all.¹⁰

Finally, it would not be appropriate to discuss *Utopia* without taking into consideration the vicissitudes of its author's life. At the time of the first publication, More was beginning his brilliant career as ambassador and had already caught the interest of the monarch for his skills and personality. At the very beginning of book 1 Henry VIII is mentioned and praised as "invictissimus" (p. 46), as a formal commendatory form,¹¹ but after that the monarch is not mentioned anymore. Naturally, More did not want any direct

⁸ Brigden, Susan, *New World, Lost Worlds. The Rule of the Tudors, 1485-1603*, London: The Penguin Press, 2000, pp. 97-99.

⁹ McCutcheon, Elizabeth, "Denying the Contrary: More's use of Litotes in the *Utopia*", in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. R. S. Sylvester and G. P. Marc'hadour, Hamden: Archon Books, 1997, p. 270.

¹⁰ Logan, pp. 40-41.

¹¹ Logan, pp. 22-23.

connection to be made between his socially critical book and the affairs of the kingdom, and this was partly avoided by destining *Utopia* to a restricted circle of readers. It was impossible, though, to prevent all copies of the book from reaching undesired eyes, hence the employment of such elaborate devices as the use of Greek names.¹²

What is astounding about *Utopia*'s historical contingency is also due to other factors: under two aspects in particular, it can also be argued that *Utopia* anticipated what was to come. The first aspect concerns religious tolerance. Only one year after the Leuven edition of *Utopia*, Martin Luther's 95 theses were exposed in Wittenberg, de facto laying the foundations for the Reformation.¹³ More, who was going to become one of the most ardent opponents to Luther, had advocated in *Utopia* the freedom of religion, stating that Utopians were entitled to choose what to believe in, even though many of them converted to Catholicism once the religion was brought to them by Hythloday's party (pp. 217-241). The religious question was going to play a pivotal role in More's life: not only did he fiercely oppose Lutheranism and write against it (the *Responsio ad Lutherum* was written in and published in 1523)¹⁴, but he also would become a defender of Catholicism during the schism of the Anglican Church. The second aspect that is worth mentioning is how the debate between Morus and Hythloday, the *Dialogue of Counsel*, would become so fitting to More's life. Little could he have known in 1516 that he was destined to become Lord Chancellor, and yet More outlines quite a similar scenario in book 1. The debate between the three characters on whether the intellectual, philosopher, humanist or learned man should engage with politics to guide the monarch sums up the last years of More's life in quite a close manner. It is a question that does not reach a solution in *Utopia*, where

¹² Firpo, p. 67.

¹³ Elton, G. R., *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government, Vol. III: Papers and Reviews 1973-1981*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 348-350.

¹⁴ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> accessed on December 9, 2016.

the debate is left open, but More's choices throughout his life could function as practical examples of what he wrote.

Due to its place among humanist works, *Utopia* necessarily contains references to classical works that were part of the classical canon.¹⁵ The first and most evident model for More is Plato's *Republic*. This treatise includes many of the themes later developed by More, such as the description of the ideal form of government and the call for philosophers to assume roles of leadership for a better administration of the public good. Pieter Gillis, in his letter to Jérôme Busleyden, even made a direct comparison between the contents of *Utopia* and the *Republic*. In the words of the fictional poet laureate of Utopia *Anemolius*, Gillis wrote:

The ancients called me Utopia or Nowhere because of my isolation. At present, however, I am a rival of Plato's republic, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words I alone have exhibited in men and resources and laws surpassing excellence. Deservedly ought I to be called by the name of Eutopia, or Happy Land. (p. 21)

Moreover, the actual title of book 1 of More's masterpiece reads: *Sermonis quem Raphael Hythlodæus vir eximius, de optimi rei publicae statu habuit liber primus, per illustrem virum Thomam Morum inclytæ Britanniarum Urbis Londini et civem, et vicecomitem*¹⁶ leaving out any mention of the fictional name Utopia and addressing what should be considered More's main concern and the reason behind this work: a debate on the ideal form of government.¹⁷ One of the most memorable passages of the *Republic* is the call for philosophers to become the highest authorities in this social environment, since their higher morals and their understanding of human minds and desires would make them the

¹⁵ Carroll, Clare, "Humanism and English Literature in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries", in Jill Kraye, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 246.

¹⁶ The best state of a commonwealth, the discourse of the extraordinary character, Raphael Hythloday, as reported by the renowned figure, Thomas More, citizen and sheriff of the famous city of Great Britain, London, book I. (p. 47)

¹⁷ See note 3 to Firpo, p. 100.

most suitable for the difficult task of ruling.¹⁸ In fact, Kings who receive the authority through a dynastic line could prove unapt for this position, since they did not obtain it because of their merits. The good ruler would understand the common good and create laws which have the aim of reaching and maintaining it.¹⁹ The question of serving the rulers then was also a concern of Plato, which More re-explores through the words of his characters in book 1 and in the description of the role of intellectuals in Utopia in book 2 (pp. 225-227). The dialogic form moreover, was typical of Plato's works and reflected Socrates' method, *maieutics*.²⁰ Apart from Plato, another Greek author left evident traces in the education of More and in the composition of *Utopia*: Lucian of Samosata. As previously stated, More had contributed to several translations of the Greek poet of the second century AD and admired the use of irony pervading those works. The content of *Utopia* appeared in its true form to those who understood Greek: a lengthy and thorough description of a place, complete with details such as the length of a bridge crossing its widest river, but that does not exist. This elusive witticism served two main purposes, both of which have been already hinted at. Firstly, it would have been nothing short of reckless of More to publish a direct denunciation of the English form of government: his work would have incurred censorship or – worse – he would have had to deal with the consequences of his writings.²¹ Secondly, it was not More's desire that any type of reader understood his book. As Busleyden eloquently wrote in his letter to More dating back to November 1516, just a few weeks before the first edition of *Utopia* was printed by Dirk Martens:

¹⁸ Weiss, Roslyn, *Philosophers in the Republic: Plato's two Paradigms*, London: Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 88.

¹⁹ Plato, *Republic*, edited by Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 412.

²⁰ Weiss, Roslyn, p. 81.

²¹ Walker, Greg, *Writing under Tyranny*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 420.

In no other way could you have better or more rightly secured this object than by holding it up before reasonable mortals themselves that ideal of a commonwealth. (pp. 34-36)

Another important literary genre that influenced *Utopia* was that of travel reports. The end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century had been marked by the revolutionary geographical discoveries of the likes of Columbus, Vespucci and Da Gama. Their long travels towards new worlds were often followed by the publication of several accounts of the new lands they found, complete with detailed descriptions not only of their geographical features, but also of the populations encountered.²² Lands such as America and Indonesia were thus becoming known to the people of the Old Continent via these often-picturesque treatises which emphasised the most exotic cultural traits of the indigenous populations. A recurrent *topos* was that of the remote populations living in complete harmony among themselves and with animals and nature. The reason for this blissful condition was to be found in their isolation: they were uncontaminated by western concepts such as wealth, corruption and betrayal and did not recognise the same value of gold as Europeans.²³ In addition to this, travel reports typically had a tendency to include lists of peculiar creatures and plants to be found in these lands, responding to a particular taste readers had developed. The fascination with the unknown was a great incentive to read those reports which, rather than scientific accounts of what travellers had witnessed, became proper fantastic tales.²⁴ *Utopia* plays along those lines: to the untrained eye, there was no difference between the description of the wedding rituals of Indonesian aboriginals and the Utopian custom of presenting the groom-to-be with their bride so that

²² Speake, Jennifer, *Literature of Travel and Exploration*, New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2003, pp. 336-340.

²³ Speake, p. 342.

²⁴ Rennie, Neil, *Far-Fetched Facts: The Literature of Travel and the Idea of the South Seas*, London: Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 196-199.

he could see her naked before the wedding ceremony and night and she would see him (pp. 187-189). Moreover, the fact that the official narrator of the Utopian customs and institutions was a Portuguese sailor that had accompanied Vespucci in three of his four travels is part of this fictional frame that More crafted to give a realistic appearance to *Utopia*.²⁵

The plot of *Utopia* is a rather simple one. As the complete title suggests, the focus is on the best form of government and, in fact, the mere description of Utopian laws and customs is concentrated only in book 2. Book 1, written after More returned to England and later inserted in the manuscript, consists of an introduction to the main characters, several digressions on the current affairs of Europe in the 1510s and the dialogue between the three characters Morus, Hythloday and Gillis. It could be said that, while book 2 properly deals with the ideal island of Utopia, book 1 is a preamble that gives credibility to the whole tale (due to the realistic setting, the use of two real characters, Morus and Gillis, and by saying that Hythloday was a sailor accompanying Vespucci). This preamble also sets the tone for the indirect comparison between England and Utopia: the discussion on bad practices such as the hanging of thieves (pp. 59-63) is mirrored by the Utopian law concerning slavery, showing how the former is not only useless in fighting delinquency, but also harmful. Of the many letters of the corpus that surrounds *Utopia*, More's first letter to Gillis (1516) included in the 1518 Basel edition is the one that best presents the book. In fact Logan, in his *The Meaning of More's Utopia*, considered this letter as a vital part of *Utopia* and dedicated a chapter of the book to its analysis.²⁶ The content of this letter is relevant for a number of reasons. It begins with a

²⁵ Logan, p. 35.

²⁶ Logan, pp. 19-31.

typically humanist device: More's deprecation of his own work (pp. 39-41), and his apologies for the delay in sending it to his friend. His delay was hardly excusable because the content of the book was not a product of his imagination, requiring time to be conceived, but a matter of "writ[ing] down simply what I had heard" (p.39). He then proceeded to a request of help to Gillis which is a remarkable example of humanist irony. He could not remember, he wrote, the exact length of the main bridge in the capital city of Utopia. Despite the trivially detailed description of the problem, what caught the attention of the Greek-knowing readership was that said river was named *Anydrus*, Waterless, and the capital *Amaurotum*, Miragecity, which More jokingly defined barbarous names in another letter to Gillis (p. 251). More needed this confirmation from Gillis, he wrote, because he did not want to lie in his text. In this remarkably witty passage, More's irony is evident:

If you do not remember, I shall put down, as I have actually done, what I myself seem to remember. Just as I shall take great pains to have nothing incorrect in the book, so, if there is doubt about anything, I shall rather tell an objective falsehood than an intentional lie – for I would rather be honest than wise. (p.41)

More even asks his friend Gillis, who in the fiction of the book was present at the dialogue with Hythloday, to contact the Portuguese sailor if possible, to ask him the exact coordinates of Utopia, since More forgot to do so when they talked. With yet another example of this playful undertone that runs through the book, More here fends off any suspicion of untruthfulness: it is possible to locate the island more accurately, he just failed to ask Hythloday when he had the chance.²⁷

The beginning of book 1 contains the aforementioned reference to Henry VIII and sets the scene for the dialogue. Up to this point, facts correspond to reality: More was sent

²⁷ Allen, Peter R., "*Utopia* and European Humanism: The Function of the Prefatory Letters and Verses", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 10 (1963), pp. 98.

to Flanders on a diplomatic mission by the King and, during a dull period of the negotiations, he visited Antwerp and its Registrar, Pieter Gillis. It is Gillis who, one day after Mass, lingered in the church square talking to:

a stranger, a man of advance years, with sunburnt countenance and long beard and cloak hanging carelessly from his shoulder, while his appearance and dress seemed [...] to be those of a ship's captain. (p. 49)

Gillis introduced him as Raphael Hythloday, a sailor who had just returned from a long permanence on the island of Utopia, where he first landed following one of Vespucci's trips (p.51). The three quickly relocated to More's house garden to discuss the people and places Hythloday had seen during his travels. In this almost topical paradisiacal setting, the three begin discussing the state of England, where Hythloday had spent some time a few years earlier. As Firpo notes, the choice of time of the day recalls Cicero's *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, where the philosophical debate takes place in the peaceful Academy during the afternoon, when nobody is around to disturb.²⁸ Hythloday narrated his visit to Cardinal Morton and the debate happening at his household on the practice of the death penalty for thieves. Hythloday's adversary in the debate was a layman trying to win the powerful Cardinal's favour, a perfect prototype of those parasites that, according to the sailor, were one of England's greatest disgraces (p. 63). Peasants are forced to steal, Hythloday argued, because they are left with no other way of feeding their families, therefore not even death penalty can be an effective deterrent. The flaw in the system is to be found in those aristocrats who fire them because they prefer to maintain a whole pack of parasites in their households. In addition to that, there was one serious plague infecting England at the time: "sheep [...] so greedy and wild that they devour human beings themselves and devastate and depopulate fields, houses and towns" (p. 67). Such

²⁸ See note 80 in Firpo, p. 290.

a memorable statement refers to the practice of enclosure, which was depriving many farmers not only of their own sustainability, but also of their homes (pp. 65-69). More's indirect attack to a practice that was supported by the King and fostered by Wolsey²⁹ was expressed through the convenient intermediary of the words of a fictional character (though Hythloday was also used to pay a homage to Cardinal Morton, see p. 59).

Following Hythloday's anecdote, Morus (this is how the fictional character will be henceforth referred to, to distinguish him from the author) is amazed by his wisdom and his sharpness in understanding social and political matters. He says: "you could do the greatest good to the common weal by your advice" (p.87), continuing the debate begun by Gillis (p. 55). This *Dialogue of Counsel* (pp. 87-103) will be analysed in a different section in more detail. Hythloday, after Morus and Gillis's insistence on the utility for him of serving the monarch, finishes the debate stating that:

I do not wonder [...] that it looks this way to you, being a person who has no picture at all, or else a false one, of the situation I mean. But you should have been with me in Utopia and personally seen their manners and customs as I did, for I lived there more than five years and would never have wished to leave except to make known that new world. In that case you unabashedly would admit that you had never seen a well-ordered people anywhere but here. (p. 107)

The two humanists do not seem to be fully persuaded by this last statement, since Morus replies:

If so, my dear Raphael, [...] I beg and beseech you, give us a description of the island. Do not be brief [...]. And you must think we wish to know everything of which we are still ignorant. (p. 109)

This technically serves as a trait d'union with book 2, which deals with the institutions of Utopia in detail.

Book 2 begins a few hours after the ending of the dialogue that is book 1. Morus, Hythloday and Gillis returns to the garden after lunch to hear the sailor's tales about the

²⁹ Gwyn, Peter, J., *The King's Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of Thomas Wolsey*, London: Pimlico, 2002, pp. 125-126.

island. He proceeds to a physical description of the island, roughly resembling England in size.³⁰ Making Utopia an island was no casual choice. It is the representation of a society that can maintain its perfection and integrity because of its isolation. The island's radical organisation can only survive free of external influences, being surrounded by the ocean.³¹ Therefore, Utopia is very protective of its natural borders, despite being no stranger to commerce and, under particular circumstances, to war. For example, despite having many harbours along the coast, those are naturally protected by cliffs and Utopians only need small troops to patrol the remaining ones (pp. 111-112). Curiously, Utopia was not an island originally: its mythical founder Utopus, Hythloday states, "ordered the excavation of fifteen miles [...] where the land was connected with the continent" (p. 113), artificially making Utopia an island. Hythloday then describes the cities of the island, in particular the capital *Amaurotum*. They all resemble each other in planimetry and architecture: there is no room for creativity or diversity and all buildings are the same, because there is no social disparity between their inhabitants and houses are actually exchanged among them every ten years (pp. 121-123). Out of all the social occupations, Hythloday first describes the officials. They are subject to a rigorous hierarchy: a *sphogrant*, or *phylarch*, is chosen every year by a group of thirty families in each city. Each group of *sphogrants* is guided by a *tranibor* or *protophylarch*. The whole body of *sphogrants* consists of two hundred members and they appoint a governor choosing out of four candidates named by the people. The governor "holds office for life, unless ousted on suspicion of aiming at a tyranny" (p. 123). The *tranibors* and the governor meet every second day to take counsel about the commonwealth. Private disputes – which are very

³⁰ Logan, p. 193.

³¹ Ginzburg, Carlo, *Nessuna isola è un'isola: quattro sguardi sulla Letteratura Inglese*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2002, p. 13.

rare to begin with – are solved without time-consuming proceedings. Given More's expertise in law, this thorough description of such a functioning legal system can be viewed as an elusive remark on the corruption and sluggishness of the English one.³²

After briefly describing all the other jobs, such as agriculture (the main occupation of Utopians), trades (every citizen learns one and they never involve the making of luxury goods), the narrator moves on to social relationships. The day for Utopians is divided into clear-cut periods. They spend in total six hours working, eight sleeping and, excluding meal times, they have recreational periods during which they can either devote to their crafts or attend lectures that are mandatory only for those who have been destined to learning. After supper, they entertain each other with music or with discourse, since they are not acquainted with “foolish and ruinous game[s]” such as dice (pp.127-129). The concept of family in Utopia is very interesting with regard to the social organisation. It is organised into households, all of which must comprise no less than ten and no more than sixteen adults. Were one of these two circumstances to be the case, adults from overpopulated households would be transferred into underpopulated ones (p. 137). Meals are consumed in common halls, not out of constrictions, but simply because all Utopians, as reasonable beings, see more profit in eating what has been prepared for them by those who are devoted to such task than having to provide to their nutrition on their own (p. 141). Sick people are taken care of in public hospitals, which are “so roomy as to be comparable to as many small towns” (pp. 140-142). Special consideration is also shown to the older citizens who, as an example, are served first during supper (p.143). Some peculiar customs of the Utopians concern weddings (and especially the pre-matrimonial examinations previously mentioned, pp. 187-188) and voluntary death. When a disease:

³² Logan, p. 247.

is not only incurable, but also [...] agonising without any cessation, then the priests and the public officials exhort the man, since he is now unequal to all life's duties, a burden to himself and a trouble to others, and is living beyond the time of his death, to make up his mind not to [...] hesitate to die now that life is torture to him but [...] to free himself from this bitter life as from prison [...] or else permit others to free him. In this course he will act wisely since by death he will put an end not to enjoyment, but to torture. (p. 187)

A whole section is also dedicated to the travels of Utopian. Despite their isolation in fact, they often visit other lands for commercial reasons. In fact, since Utopia is completely auto-sufficient but also a remarkably fertile land, the surplus of produce is exported to other countries. Moreover, Utopians do not believe gold, silver and gems have any economic value and export those goods as well.³³ Another reason for their travels is warmongering. Despite being a peaceful population,³⁴ one that values bloodless victories above all, Utopians go to war when attacked and, should making the first move prove to be the most sensible course of action, it is the one they adopt (pp. 199-205). The Utopian strategy is to avoid bloodshed and open conflict as long as possible: by negotiating, by bribing the opponent army, by using mercenary troops that they can afford to pay more than anyone else, due to their abundance of gold. Sometimes however, the Utopian army would intervene in a foreign conflict: that is the case of an ally who is not capable of defending itself against an unfair attack or an advantageous move for the commonwealth (pp. 211-213). Slavery is another interesting topic: walking in *Amaurotum*, one would recognise the slaves by their golden chains and shackles. There are a few ways of becoming a slave. War prisoners remain so only if caught in a war fought by Utopians. Prisoners who have been sentenced to death in other countries become slaves if they come to Utopia. Finally, there is another class of slaves, a rather paradoxical one: “sometimes

³³ Only what is left from the primary use Utopians have for them: to make chamber pots, baby toys or chains for their slaves (p. 169).

³⁴ “War, as an activity fit only for beasts and yet practiced by no kind of beast so constantly as by man, they regard with utter loathing” (p. 199). A comparison with Henry VIII's aggressive foreign policy.

a hard-working and poverty-stricken drudge of another country voluntarily chooses slavery in Utopia” (p. 185).

Finally, Hythloday talks about religion. No official cult is institutionalised in Utopia and people have freedom of belief. There are, even in the same city, people who believe in different entities: the sun, the moon, or particularly virtuous men from the past (p. 217). Nonetheless, the large majority of the population recognises the existence of an eternal supreme deity that is beyond their comprehension and “him they call father”, because “to him alone they attribute the beginnings, the growth, [...] and the ends of all things as they have perceived them” (p. 217). Over time, Hythloday continued, Utopians have experienced a gradual distancing from “this medley of superstitions and [have begun] to unite in that one religion that seems to surpass the rest in reasonableness” (p. 217). More seems here to argue that, though Utopians do not know about Christ, they have developed a religion that carries in it the seeds of the Christian faith prior to the arrival of Hythloday and his fellow travellers.³⁵ After the arrival of western voyagers, more and more Utopians start to convert to Christendom, which becomes a wildly practiced religion. “You would not believe” Hythloday indeed tells Morus and Gillis “how readily disposed they [...] were to join it [...] through the rather mysterious inspiration of God or because they thought it nearest to that belief which has the widest prevalence among them” (p. 218). Mythical founder Utopus established freedom of cult to prevent internal conflicts among Utopians (p. 221).

At the end of Hythloday’s speech, Morus finds himself re-examining what he has heard and “many things came to [his] mind which seemed very absurdly established in the customs and laws of the people described” (p. 245). Nonetheless, he refrains from

³⁵ Firpo, p. 261.

asking Hythloday to discuss them any longer, since his interlocutor seems very tired.

Thus, he concludes:

I cannot agree with all he said. But I readily admit that there are very many features in the Utopian commonwealth which it is easier for me to wish for in our countries than to have any hope of seeing realised. (pp. 245-247)

3.2 The Characters of *Utopia*

The social critique in *Utopia* appears as rather indirect and veiled thanks to the narrative frame: it is, in the fiction of the book, simply the description of a faraway land that Hythloday had indeed visited and lived in.³⁶ Moreover, neither Gillis nor Morus seem completely persuaded that Utopians do live in a perfect world (p. 245) and the readers are then left to think that Hythloday is the only character that completely despises and rejects the current state of events in Europe in favour of Utopia (pp. 107-109). More's critique of England and Europe is present in both books, but in different forms. Firstly, when he wrote book 1, More established a comparison between England and Utopia, describing the latter in detail. In book 2 More implies that all that works in Utopia is impossible to be realised in England.³⁷ In book 1, however, he had to devise another way to express his critique. Thus, he chose to use the dialogic form which, as previously stated was typical of philosophical works such as Plato's.³⁸ This way, More could imply he was referring to England and also Europe by having one of the characters talk about them directly. Humanist philosophical writing often took the shape of fictional dialogue: "the appeal, hence the utility, of a learned work is enhanced if its lessons are dressed in the sugar-coat

³⁶ Campbell, W. E., *More's Utopia and His Social Teaching*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1930, pp. 15-18.

³⁷ Johnson, Robbin S., *More's "Utopia": Ideal and Illusion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969, pp. 56-58.

³⁸ Houston, Chloë, *The Renaissance Utopia: Dialogue, Travel and the Ideal Society*, London: Routledge, 2016, pp. 25-26.

of fiction”.³⁹ This stylistic choice presented some advantages. First of all, the challenging and sometimes unorthodox opinions could be made a prerogative of one character, severing any connection with the author’s thoughts on the same matter. This was possible given the premise that *Utopia* was simply the retelling of things More had truly heard: he was present at the time Hythloday talked about the corruption of English lawyers, but it was the sailor alone who spoke badly of them, not Morus (pp. 71 and 195). Secondly, the dialogic form created an interesting possibility in the narration: just like Morus and Gillis were initially charmed by Hythloday’s deep analysis of England’s problems and could not help but agreeing with him to a certain extent, so did the readers.⁴⁰ The way the two humanists reacted to the Portuguese sailor’s anecdote could have been the same way readers reacted: surprised but also interested in his unconventional ideas. When Gillis first mentions the question of servitude, the reader tends to agree with his statement:

I wonder that you do not attach yourself to some king. I am sure there is none of them to whom you would not be very welcome because you are capable not only of entertaining a king with this learning and experience of men and places but also of furnishing him with examples and of assisting him with counsel. Thus, you would not only serve your own interests but be of great assistance in the advancement of all your relatives and friends. (p. 55)

After Hythloday’s defends his position though, the lines become more blurred, and the readers start to share his point of view together with Morus and Hythloday. This section also provides an introduction to the narration of book 2, and it is therefore only natural that the scene should build up to the need of said narration.⁴¹

The three main characters are Hythloday, Morus and Gillis. While the first is a fictional character, both Morus and Gillis seem at a first glance to correspond to their real-life name bearers. Actually, as we shall see further on, the resemblance is much more

³⁹ Logan, p. 142.

⁴⁰ Houston, p. 28.

⁴¹ Bevington, David M., “The Dialogue in *Utopia*: Two Sides to the Question”, *Studies in Philology*, 58 (1961), pp. 498-500.

accurate in Gillis's case than in More's. Gillis's presence in the dialogue has different reasons. First of all, he acts as intermediary in the opening scene of *Utopia*, being the one who introduces Morus to Hythloday. In fact, he was previously acquainted with the sailor and introduces him to his English friend who, in his mind: "[is] always most greedy to hear" any "account [...] of unknown peoples and lands" (p. 49). It must not be forgotten that it was in Gillis's house that More had conceived and started writing *Utopia* in 1515. Gillis's house in Antwerp was a meeting point for intellectuals and humanists and therefore many stimulating ideas and conversations took place there.⁴² Given the great interest Gillis expressed in *Utopia*, resulting in his many letters and in his written contribution, it is not surprising that More chose him as the third character and Antwerp as the setting for his book. Since the original plan included only book 2, it could be assumed that Gillis's part was limited to that: a third party – a slightly less important one – in the tale of Hythloday interrupted by More's questions and remarks. Supporting this opinion, in *The Meaning of More's Utopia*, Logan highlights a discrepancy between the character of Gillis in the dialogue and the way he is presented in the opening passage (which already appeared in the original draft). Indeed, Gillis is said to be "in conversation [...] so witty and so polished without offense that his charming discourse largely took away [Morus'] nostalgia"⁴³. On the contrary however, during the debate with Hythloday, Gillis's remarks are rather infrequent and not particularly insightful. Logan finds a reason for this in the compositional history of *Utopia*: when it was first drafted, the presentation of Gillis was merely an "elaborate opening compliment"⁴⁴ to More's friend, not unlike the praise of Henry VIII as a "model monarch" (p. 47). When More added the new part,

⁴² Burke, Peter, "Humanism and Friendship in Sixteenth-Century Europe", in Julian Haseldine, ed., *Friendship in Medieval Europe*, Stroud: Sutton, 1999, p. 264.

⁴³ Logan, p. 32.

⁴⁴ Logan, p. 33.

inserting it between the presentation and book 2, he had to keep the character of Gillis even though he had no particularly incisive lines for him to utter.

The character of Raphael Hythloday is probably the most interesting in *Utopia*. His exotic appearance, his vast culture and his nonconformist ideas have been all attributed to Hythloday to make him the most suitable narrator of the ideal island and its institutions. The essence of this character is comprised of many elements that should be analysed in detail. The features of this character, in fact, are important: More chose Hythloday as the character who presents innovative and unconventional ideas. Therefore, all the elements that the author chose to describe highlight aspects of Hythloday that are important to the narration. He is presented as a voyager, a sailor to be more precise, who has travelled extensively around the world. In an age of geographical discoveries such as the fifteenth and sixteenth century, a man who travelled was an adventurer, a pioneer. Hythloday was born in Portugal, a land that had produced many explorers such as Vasco da Gama and Pedro Álvares Cabral. Such a traveller would have seen things unimaginable to the common man, and to listen to his tales would have been a privilege. From his appearance, Morus guesses Hythloday could be a ship captain, and his first impression proves to be almost accurate (p. 49). Hythloday is a man of the sea, but not a careless one, like Palinurus, Aeneas's "ill-fated pilot"⁴⁵ who fell asleep and plunged in the water and drowned, Gillis points out (p. 49). Instead he is like Ulysses, who travelled to acquire knowledge, or even like Plato (p. 49). It should be noted though, that a comparison with the Homeric hero can carry another meaning as well: Ulysses is not just the archetype of intelligence and resourcefulness, he is also the cunning liar.⁴⁶ Hythloday, More writes,

⁴⁵ Rudat, Wolfgang E. H., "Thomas More, Hythloday, and Odysseus: An Anatomy of *Utopia*", *American Imago*, 37.1 (1980), p. 38.

⁴⁶ Rudat, 1980, p. 38.

has devoted his life to the study of philosophy, and is thus fluent in Greek more than in Latin. Indeed, with the exception of Seneca and Cicero, all the philosophy worth reading is in Greek, More would later argue in a letter to the University of Oxford dated 29 March 1518.⁴⁷ This consideration is reprises in book 2 of *Utopia*, where Hythloday describes the literary tastes of Utopian after he and his fellow sailors brought books with them (pp. 181-185). At one point of his life, Hythloday had decided to leave Portugal pushed by his desire to see the world. Therefore, he had joined Amerigo Vespucci's expeditions and participated to three of them. When the Italian explorer was about to return to Europe, Hythloday had begged him to allow him and a few other men to remain in a fort "at the farthest point of the last voyage" (p. 51). In doing so, Raphael was pushed by his greater interest in exploring the unknown world and his attitude could be explained by two of his sayings "he who has no grave is covered by the sky" and "from all places it is the same distance to heaven" (p. 51). From there, they had travelled further east and south, encountering many different lands and populations. He had seen many wonderful things, such as "waste deserts scorched with continual heath" (p. 53). The small party he belonged to had met several indigenous populations and had taught some of them how to use the compass (p. 53). Finally, they had reached the island of Utopia where they remained for a long period, fascinated by the lifestyle of its inhabitants and the well-functioning government. He had lived among Utopians for five years and had formed the opinion that the island was the best place to live on earth. His return to Europe was motivated simply by the necessity to tell people about the institutions of Utopia (p. 107). All these elements serve the purpose of making Hythloday the character that interests the reader, not only but especially the one who believes he was real. His clothing and his sun-

⁴⁷ Firpo, p. 103.

burnt countenance indicates he came from a foreign land, meaning he has seen many places and peoples, and his age confers a certain sense of authority to him, it “betokens wisdom”.⁴⁸ Even the choice of his first name contributes to this effect: Raphael, as in the angel who escorted Tobias, represents a guide-like figure.⁴⁹ The contradiction, however, ensues with his surname: Hythloday derives from Greek with the meaning of “nonsense-peddler”.⁵⁰ More endows Hythloday with all the attributes and features of the philosopher: his style has a careless simplicity, he is not concerned with appearances. It is a character that “embodies a specifically humanist conception of philosophy”⁵¹ which had been theorised before, for example by Erasmus in *The Education of a Christian Prince*. This philosophy does not dispute on the origins of the world and of mankind, but:

Frees the mind from the false opinions and the vicious predilections of the masses and points out a theory of government according to the example of the Eternal Power.⁵²

Hythloday, thanks to his studies and his travels, lives according to the humanist ideal of adding practical experience to contemplation.⁵³ The reference to Hythloday’s classical culture and his admiration for Cicero and Seneca could point to another reflection: his field is moral philosophy, the branch of that discipline that is connected with political theory and the only one that scholars placed among the *studia humanitatis*.⁵⁴ For More, it is especially Hythloday’s expertise in moral philosophy that entitles him to discuss political theory. In fact, the detailed introduction to the sailor is meant to establish the

⁴⁸ Logan, p. 33.

⁴⁹ McCutcheon, Elizabeth, “Thomas More, Raphael Hythlodæus and the Angel Raphael”, *Studies in English Literature*, 9 (1969), p. 25.

⁵⁰ Rudat, Wolfgang E. H., “Thomas More and Hythloday: Some Speculations on *Utopia*”, *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance*, 43 (1981), p. 126.

⁵¹ Logan, p. 34.

⁵² Erasmus, Desiderius, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, edited by Lester K. Born, New York: Octagon Books, 1968, pp. 133-134.

⁵³ Kristeller, Paul Oskar, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts. Collected Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 59.

⁵⁴ Kristeller, p. 29.

legitimate ground for the serious political debate to follow. What the readers get from the *Dialogue of Counsel*, however, is that Hythloday refuses the practical aspect of moral philosophy: he could be defined as the aloof idealist, perfectly perceptive of the world around him, but unwilling to meddle with it and lose his integrity.⁵⁵

The analysis of the character of Morus is not simple. Fictionally, it corresponded to the author of *Utopia*, and that posed quite a few problems for More. Most of all, what could be troubling was that all of Morus' words would be considered what More had actually said at the time of the dialogue with Hythloday. Therefore, as previously stated, More chose Hythloday as the character with the revolutionary ideas and convictions and made Morus the counterpart in the dialogue, what Plato had been to Socrates.⁵⁶ What is relevant though, is that the opinion the readers are more inclined towards is Hythloday's, just as it was Socrates's. The remarks Morus makes, especially in book 1, fit in the narration because they correspond to what the public would have wanted to ask, while Hythloday's responses are what the audience should listen to and learn. In the fiction of the book, for the sake of verisimilitude, Morus has the same characteristics as More.⁵⁷ He is described an ambassador sent by the King to represent England in some negotiations and a friend of Gillis. One day, after attending the church, he spots his fellow humanist talking to the exotic-looking man with the long beard and, upon approaching them, is introduced. Thanks to Hythloday's anecdote about the gathering at Cardinal Morton's, Morus is prompted to express his fond opinion on the man who had recommended him to Oxford (pp. 85-87), which was obviously More's opinion as well. Morus is the "public man", one with a specific and well-defined identity in the real context of his Flanders

⁵⁵ McCutcheon, 1969, p. 27.

⁵⁶ Bevington, p. 502.

⁵⁷ Rudat, 1981, p. 128.

embassy.⁵⁸ On the contrary, Hythloday is not only the fantastic character, he is also the stranger, the man belonging to no country anymore, except maybe for Utopia.

3.3 Book 2: Humanists in Utopia

As previously stated, the focus of this thesis is on the *Dialogue of Counsel* in book 1. However, there are some elements in book 2 that are related to the topic and therefore should be analysed. Those elements are the concept of education and the role of intellectuals in Utopia. Much as More himself did, we shall examine book 2 first, and then focus on book 1. Education in Utopia is considered a necessary asset for the preservation of the commonwealth. Children learn the “good opinions” from a young age so that those will have time to process them and they will “accompany them all through their adult life” (p. 229). The underlying concept to this practice is that the commonwealth “never decays except through vices which arise from wrong attitudes” (p. 229) that need to be eradicated from infancy. In Europe, education was still largely elitist, though Humanism had tried to foster studies in vulgar languages in the universities, so that more people could benefit from them.⁵⁹ Thomas More himself had been educated in élite schools and institutions, such as Oxford, which constituted a privilege, not a custom. For example, his daughters, and especially the clever Margaret, had been home-schooled, since high education was a prerogative of boys, and only because their father had insisted on their cultural formation.⁶⁰ On the contrary, More devised for Utopians a universal educative system that included boys and girls and even the children of foreign-born slaves

⁵⁸ Greenblatt, p. 34.

⁵⁹ Kristeller, Paul Oskar, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts. Collected Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 66.

⁶⁰ Stapleton, Thomas, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, edited by E. E. Reynolds, London: Burns & Oates, 1966, p. 24.

(p. 185). Like everything in Utopia, educations bring great advantage to the common good. The upbringing of the Utopians in fact, eliminates the necessity of many laws and rules. This is possible because, thanks to the education they receive, once they are adults Utopians are bound to “distinguish true pleasure from false and prefer the former”⁶¹ and act consequently. They are altogether better disposed towards the regulations of the social order in Utopia.⁶² Once again, this was a concept of classical origin, and More reprised the *Republic* in particular: according to Plato, if the citizens of the polis received a proper education, they would be able to discern the good from the bad with no need for rules nor lawyers.⁶³ Utopia, as previously mentioned, does not require many lawyers: another veiled critique to the English legal system, whose unnecessary tortuousness provided for frequent trials, often pointless ones, and therefore a numerous group of lawyers.⁶⁴ Moreover, learning from a young age is a source of pleasure for the Utopians: to them, the “contemplation of truth” (p. 179) they gained through studying constitutes the highest virtue (p. 183).

The education in Utopia is entrusted to priests. The peculiarity of Utopian priests is that they are elected by the people and are a limited number, thirteen in each city, another veiled comparison with the conspicuous amount of people in England joining the Church without a real vocation.⁶⁵ Everyday Utopians devote only six hours to manual work and the *siphogrants* are dispensed from it, since their job is to make sure everything is running smoothly (p. 131). The only category that is truly exempted from manual work includes those who, noted by the priests, have demonstrated to possess since childhood

⁶¹ Logan, p. 200.

⁶² Logan, p. 202.

⁶³ Logan, p. 201.

⁶⁴ More, as part of that category himself, knew only too well the many-layered intricacies of the legal system and was criticising it.

⁶⁵ Firpo, p. 275.

certain qualities and those who, during their hours of leisure, have proven to have a true talent in their studies (p. 129). The elite group is characterised by a good personality, a particularly quick mind and a good disposition towards learning. Their duty in life is to devote their time and energy to studying and learning, just like the humanists. Once again, More alludes to the *Republic*: in book 3 Plato stresses the importance of the role of the Governors, who are learned men themselves. They should keep an eye on those children and who show signs of a sharp intellect and direct them towards the life of the intellectuals.⁶⁶ The comparison goes even further: just like the *Republic* is governed by philosophers, all the Utopian magistrates (*syphogrants*, *tranibors* and the *ademus*, the highest-ranking magistrate) and the priests are elected from the group of the designated intellectuals (p. 133). The total number of people who are exempted from labour work amounts to five hundred. From those, setting apart all the magistrates and the priests, only an exiguous number remains. Those could be considered the professional scholars.

After Hythloday's arrival to Utopia, things start to change. The sailor happens to have stowed a great deal of books before embarking on his exploring trip: in fact, his plan was either to return to Europe after a long time or not at all (pp. 181-183). Thus, he introduces the Utopians to "the literature and learning of the Greeks" (p. 181), of which he is a great expert. The citizens beg him to teach them the language and, despite his initial hesitation, Hythloday is soon persuaded it is a worthy endeavour. Indeed:

They began so easily to imitate the shapes of the letters, so readily to pronounce the words, so quick to learn by heart, and so faithfully to reproduce what they had learned that it was a perfect wonder. (p. 181)

Their progress is so fast that in less than three years Utopians have mastered the Greek language and are "perfect in the language and able to peruse good authors without any

⁶⁶ Firpo, p. 179.

difficulty” (p. 181). For the swiftness of their learning of the language, Hythloday supposes they originated from the Greeks, since:

Their language, which in almost all other respects resembles the Persian, retains some traces of Greek in the names of their cities and officials. (p. 181).

More is directly pointing out the fact that names had Greek origins, but the extent of this revelation is only appreciable by his fellow humanists, so the whole pretence of *Utopia* is not at risk. Hythloday insists on the learning of Greek because, in his opinion, it is superior to Latin: in fact, except from some historians and poets, the rest of Latin classical literature was not up to the level of its predecessor. In this passage, it is possible to read More’s own advocacy of the superiority of Greek, a value shared with many other humanists. In a letter to Martin Dorp, dated 21 October 1515, More expressed this concept and defended this opinion profusely.

It would take me forever to list all that anyone lacks who lacks Greek. Nonetheless I am not unaware that without any Greek many others, and you above all, have advanced [...] toward the very citadel of learning, [...] however hard they strain and pant. Even so, I would dare to say this much is certain: if you would add Greek to the rest of your attainments you would then surpass even yourself by as much as you now surpass others regardless of their skill in Greek.⁶⁷

Those were decisive years, in the humanist community, for the rediscovery and promotion of Greek as the learned language. This current of thought had been challenged by the heritage of the defenders of the sufficiency of Latin, such as Italian humanist Pomponius Laetus.⁶⁸ However, despite his great effort in defending the importance of Greek, More was also “for the Latins: Sallust, Livy, Tacitus and Suetonius” with Livy being his favourite “storehouse of good phrase and example”.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, the list of authors that

⁶⁷ More, Thomas, *In Defense of Humanism*, edited by Daniel Kinney, 1986, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 105.

⁶⁸ Mann, Nicholas, “The Origins of Humanism”, in Jill Kraye, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 12.

⁶⁹ Trapp, J.B., *Erasmus, Colet and More: The Early Tudor Humanists and their Books*, London: British Library, 1991, p. 49.

Hythloday brings to the Utopians included Greek authors Plutarch, Thucydides, Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Homer, Euripides, Sophocles, Galen, Hippocrates and Herodian. Though they are all authors belonging to the canon of the *studia humanitatis*, More also chose this list of works as a homage to the Italian printer, editor, philologist and humanist Aldus Manutius, who had died at the beginning of 1515. Manutius had been the editor of many *editiones principes* of said authors and his Greek editions were among the most used by humanists due to the clarity of the small Aldine type.⁷⁰

What More tried to convey with the description of the Utopian customs concerning education apparently fits with Morus and Gillis's opinion in the debate with Hythloday. In fact, since in Utopia all the ruling positions are occupied by intellectuals, it should be the most advisable course of action even for the sailor, who advocates the superiority of the Utopian institutions. And yet, the difference is little but significant: it concerns not those who should give advice, but those who should receive it. As we shall see, the problem of Europe was not the unwillingness of the likes of Hythloday to serve their monarch. It was, rather, the European monarchs' own lack of predisposition to hear the useful and constructive advice that discouraged the intellectuals. The reason behind this was that kings would "only listen to flatterers".⁷¹ On the contrary, in Utopia, cultural advancement is accompanied by the building of a moral code. In addition to the early education of the individuals, who are exposed to virtuous examples from the beginning, Utopians are not prone to vices in their free time either. In fact, even if they do not want to dedicate their hours of leisure to studying, they do not run the risk of being tempted by

⁷⁰ Trapp, p. 63.

⁷¹ Skinner, p. 217.

ruinous distractions, such as gambling (pp. 137-139). In Utopia, therefore, the problem does not exist: all children receive the same early education to good principles and any seed of greed for power or absolutism is eradicated, making the population, including those holding public positions, predisposed to accept good advice.⁷²

⁷² Skinner, pp. 217-218.

4. Focus on book 1

4.1 Morus/Hythloday

As seen in the previous section on the characters in *Utopia*, More carefully crafted Raphael Hythloday to embody specific features. He then counterposed to Hythloday no other than himself, the “More who appear[ed] in the work as both presenter (or recorder) and character”.¹ The reason behind this was strictly connected with the role and, more specifically, with the opinions of Hythloday: he spoke in a potentially dangerous way for More.² However, once the character of Hythloday is analysed in comparison with Morus, the opposition between the two gains a whole new perspective. In fact, as argued by Greenblatt, among others, Raphael Hythloday

Represents all that More deliberately excluded from the personality he created and played; he is the sign of More’s awareness of his own self-creation, hence his own incompleteness.³

What should be explained, then, is why More needed to exclude some part of his personality. This problem was not confined to the pages of *Utopia*, but invested every aspect of More’s life, his public life in particular.

At the time of the Tudor court under Henry VIII appearances mattered a lot. Courtiers were vying to obtain the King’s favour and unashamed flattery was the order of the day. Moreover, public life was governed by a set of strict formal rules, a code that included reverence to the King, luxury and a display of wealth as conspicuous as possible,

¹ Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 33.

² Walker, Greg, *Writing under Tyranny*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 45-46.

³ Greenblatt, p. 33.

all conventions to be respected.⁴ The complex network of secret interests that motivated the courtiers was not that different from the portrait Hythloday delineates in book 1, and the most disastrous result was the presence around the monarch of a thick group of flatterers. More, even before his entrance in that world, was aware of the situation, since he was a “canny judge of human motives”.⁵ He was motivated, however, by a sense of civic duty, a concept deriving from civic humanism in Italy, and maybe – at least in part – by a sort of initial enthusiasm for being involved in the court where all decisions were made and where power resided. When he wrote *Utopia* though, More was almost forty years old, thus no juvenile naivety could have prompted him to accept the King’s career advancements if he truly did not believe in his usefulness at court. His wits and his undeniable expertise in law and diplomacy were the means he used to climb the social ladder and he definitely took pride in his achievements.⁶ More embraced his political career with passion. Moreover, had he not believed Henry VIII could be a good ruler with the proper advisors, he might have left his service earlier or, if he had adopted Cromwell’s mode of flattery, he would not have refused to submit to the Oath of Supremacy. However, there is another problem that must be kept in mind: the moral cost More’s public role had on him. Erasmus’s description of More’s personality – and other accounts of it – show that Thomas More was as distant as possible from the opulence and the splendour of the court.⁷ He was very modest in manners and sober in countenance and clothing, even when he became a wealthy man. The sobriety he favoured derived also from his initial desire to embrace the prelacy, and meeting individuals such as Cardinal

⁴ McGurk, John, *The Tudor Monarchies, 1485-1603*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 78-80.

⁵ Greenblatt, p. 15.

⁶ Guy, John, Alexander, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980, p. 33.

⁷ Ackroyd, Peter, *The Life of Thomas More*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1998, p. 126.

Wolsey only exacerbated his rejection of the corruptive influence of the court.⁸ On one hand, More was torn between the mask he had to wear in public and the true inclinations of his personality, deeply in contrast one with the other. On the other hand, he understood his situation perfectly and was willing to make the necessary adjustments. This disposition toward compromise was enacted in real life by choosing to wear said mask to play a part.⁹ On the stage represented by Henry's court More walked confidently in his scene clothes: those of the charismatic, charming and expert-in-worldly-affairs advisor. The fictional part of his role at court was not in his actions per se, but rather in the attitude he was forced to adopt when performing his duties.¹⁰ More was able to conduct himself with diplomacy until the Great Matter of the King. At that time, he managed to avoid a direct confrontation with the King's ideas, even though More was never in doubt in his conviction on the matter of the divorce.¹¹ However, he had become too powerful and too relevant at court to be allowed silence on such a delicate question, and eventually he opted for his resignation, causing his own death sentence.

Thomas More's end, caused by his refusal to bend to the King's orders, may divert the attention from an important fact: More did categorically stand up for what he believed in, but that was merely the final act of his otherwise successful career. It should always be taken into consideration that Sir Thomas More not only survived, but actually flourished at the very core of the Tudor court for nearly twenty years.¹² In other words, though his death was praised as a martyrdom, his life up to that point had been a life of artful compromise. In fact, it could be argued that the parts of his personality More had

⁸ Elton, G. R., *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government, Vol. III: Papers and Reviews 1973-1981*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 349.

⁹ Greenblatt, pp. 27-31.

¹⁰ Elton, p. 352.

¹¹ Guy, p. 188.

¹² Greenblatt, p. 15.

to exclude – or rather hide – were so clear to him even at the start of his career, that he managed to give life to them through Raphael Hythloday. When assuming this, an interesting consideration should be made. In *Utopia*, More's private persona, Hythloday, faces his public persona, Morus, in a debate on the role that More actually played at court. Morus represented the perfect intellectual courtier, up to date with any political affair and a true Englishman, perfectly accustomed to the conventions and manners of the Tudor court.¹³ Hythloday, on the contrary, was the stranger, the man who did not belong at a King's side and who believed his own culture and knowledge would be of use to himself alone. Morus believed in adapting himself to the situation, however disagreeable that could have been, to be granted the possibility to maintain his position of advisor. Hythloday rejected such an attitude adamantly: in his mind, there was no cause worthy of the loss of one's integrity. To Morus, what mattered above all else, was that the learned people used their intellect for the sake of the common good. This concept was pivotal in civic humanism, which designated a specific role for the intellectuals: their duty was to transmit the good values they had acquired through the classics to the rulers. In doing so, they would benefit the monarchs greatly and, indirectly, the whole population.¹⁴ More, as other humanists did, felt invested with great responsibility and embraced the task with true conviction. Humanists were self-assured in their role as political advisors by one conviction in particular. They firmly believed that history could warn people of the evils that their ancestors had dealt with, thus providing examples of a good and virtuous course of action to follow.¹⁵ This derived from a claim that such humanists made: "all knowledge

¹³ McCutcheon, Elizabeth, "Thomas More, Raphael Hythlodæus and the Angel Raphael", *Studies in English Literature*, 9 (1969), p. 32.

¹⁴ Kristeller, pp. 58-61.

¹⁵ Skinner, Quentin, *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought, Volume one: The Renaissance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 220.

ought to be for use”, implying that the best way to use it was by counselling a ruler.¹⁶ Moreover, advising a monarch meant contributing to the maintainance of the monarchy and – consequently – “assisting in the preservation of the best possible form of commonwealth”.¹⁷ Hythloday however, had no trace of that enthusiasm and that faith in the role of the counsellor. He was rather disenchanted as concerns to the actual amount of good a humanist could cause, and he was more than keen on justifying his reasons.

Simply judging by More’s choices in life, it could be argued that he was deeply aware of the contradictions and of the risks in his choice of a career. Had he not fully comprehended what serving a monarch like Henry could imply, he would not have been so cautious throughout his years at court. He had to put aside his own contempt for practices that he could not prevent the King from enacting, because, all things considered, he had more faith in his role, which he believed to be decisive.¹⁸ The words he put in Hythloday’s mouth in the *Dialogue of Counsel* should not be taken simply as the ones he would have wanted to say but decided not to. More was aware that his commitment to the King could lead to results that did not match his expectations; after all, Henry VIII showed his true colours from the early years of his reign.¹⁹ Despite this, he was willing to give his contribution, however small that would be. In doing so, he had to be surrounded by people he despised, such as Cromwell and Wolsey, to play along rules he found ridiculous and to endure a lifestyle that was the complete opposite of what he wanted for himself. Hythloday’s position can therefore be seen as self-criticism of those negative aspects of the choice he had made.²⁰ He did realise his decision was flawed, and Hythloday points

¹⁶ Skinner, p. 219.

¹⁷ Skinner, p. 219.

¹⁸ Skinner, p. 218.

¹⁹ Walker, p. 24.

²⁰ Greenblatt, p. 33.

out all the flaws as a reminder to More and to others in the same situation. Raphael Hythloday's presence in *Utopia* is evidence of the self-awareness of More when it came to his role. The fact the *Dialogue of Counsel* did not provide a clean-cut solution can be taken as a sign that More believed one day he would probably want to adopt Hythloday's position.²¹ At the time of *Utopia* though, and until he resigned from the Chancellorship in 1532, he was and would be like Morus.

4.2 The Question of Servitude

The "humanist belief that the links between sound learning and sound government are extremely close" gained much popularity and was embraced by many Northern humanists already at the end of the 15th century.²² Consequently, a great deal of educational treatises was produced, providing a complete account of the type of formation meant for future rulers. Such treatises were highly influential in establishing a sort of "pattern of instruction" for rulers which would last for a long time. Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* is a great example: it contains all the information on the educational pattern meant for Queen Elizabeth.²³ Though not very popular in England, the genre of the *Specula principum* was frequently explored by Northern humanists, and Erasmus wrote one of the most prominent examples of it: *The Education of a Christian Prince*, addressed to the future Charles V.²⁴ Apart from *Specula principum*, humanists also dedicated some manuals to nobles, councillors and courtiers. The blueprint came from the Italian tradition of political writing: Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* which – among others – inspired

²¹ And he did in the end, see More's anecdote in Roper, pp. 73-74.

²² Skinner, p. 213.

²³ Lewis, C. S., *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, pp. 180-181.

²⁴ Skinner, p. 214.

Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governour*, published in 1531.²⁵ Italian – and specifically Florentine – civic humanism often dealt with problems concerning the “whole body of citizens” rather than the stricter audience of rulers and nobles.²⁶ This trend encountered more difficulties in spreading in England, due to the country's “more hierarchical conditions” compared to Italy.²⁷ A most striking exception is *Utopia*, which deals with social issues in a broader spectrum than those of the ruling class.

Northern humanism embraced the argument, derived from civic humanism, that “if philosophers cannot hope to become kings, the next best thing must be for kings to be advised as closely as possible by philosophers”.²⁸ Therefore humanists often pursued careers as political advisors, mainly as secretaries or ambassadors. Sir Thomas Elyot, for example, became Senior Clerk to the King's Council and ambassador to the court of Emperor Charles V.²⁹ Thomas More was among the most prominent of these intellectuals because he was not only among the greatest theorists but also the one with the most successful career. Many advisors, and More was no exception, included in their works references to the problem of counsel.³⁰ The central issue was how to provide useful, honest and right-minded political advice to the ruler. Usually, the problem was approached from the ruler's point of view and a great deal of importance was attributed to the choice of good councillors. Flattery was considered the worst enemy in this process, in fact Erasmus devoted an entire chapter of *The Education of a Christian Prince* to this

²⁵ Kristeller, pp. 53-54.

²⁶ Skinner, p. 215.

²⁷ Skinner, p. 215.

²⁸ Skinner, p. 216.

²⁹ Lehmborg, S. E., *Sir Thomas Elyot, Tudor Humanist*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1960, pp. 54-55.

³⁰ Ferguson, Arthur B., *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1965, pp. 90-92.

problem: *The prince must avoid Flatterers*.³¹ It is important to keep in mind that the relevance of this problem was great among Classical authors as well: a great example can be Plutarch's essay *How to distinguish a Friend from a Flatterer*.³² There was, however, a group of humanists who approached the problem differently: they focused on the reformation of the commonwealth and analysed the question from the opposite point of view, that of the councillor. The core of the question then became, rather than the king's choice of advisors, the humanist's own dilemma of choosing between contemplative life and active life, *otium* and *negotium*. The origins of this question also derived from the classics: the Ciceronian concept that worth resides in action was one of the most important examples.³³ Civic humanists naturally highlighted the superiority of active life. They had distanced themselves from the medieval monastic ideals and aimed at a practical and earthly scope for their studies, relying on the concept of virtue residing in the works of classical authors. The ideal of contemplative life also attracted numerous supporters. Petrarch and especially the Florentine Academy, for example, had praised the role of solitude and isolation as pivotal to their philosophy.³⁴ In support of this choice there were several arguments. Among them, the ideal that a philosopher's first duty is to his learning, thus: "no man of virtue should ever abandon a life of scholarship in order to make [...] a career in public affairs".³⁵ In fact, those are considered to be the domain of hypocrisy, falsity and corruption. Another typical concept used against active life was that kings were generally prone to tyrannical passions and offering them honest advice could prove

³¹ Philips, Margaret Mann, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance*, London: Boydell & Brewer, 1981, p. 34.

³² Skinner, p. 216.

³³ Trapp, p. 58.

³⁴ Kristeller, p. 59.

³⁵ Skinner, p. 217.

to be dangerous.³⁶ Other humanists, conversely, criticised the isolation of the philosophers who secluded themselves in their ivory towers,³⁷ advocating the importance of their contribution to public affairs. It was a general humanist ideal that that ancient philosophy should be a “guide to modern life” and that the “key to political wisdom lies in a proper understanding of the past”.³⁸ Christophorus Landinus had written a dialogue, the *Disputationes Camaldulenses* (ca. 1473), where active life was defended by Lorenzo de’ Medici and contemplative life by Leon Battista Alberti.³⁹ In short, it was a relevant debate among humanists, one that had many argumentations on each side but no clean-cut solution. Generally, these debates about *otium* and *negotium* tended towards a resolution in favour of involvement in the business of government, but *Utopia* is a great exception.⁴⁰

More came across this problem early in his life, through the works of Pico della Mirandola, whose biography he translated into English.⁴¹ When he composed book 1 of *Utopia* he provided his personal take on the debate through the *Dialogue of Counsel*. The structure of the dialogue is quite simple. After Hythloday has spoken about the many people he had encountered in his travels, Gillis is prompted to say: “I wonder that you do not attach yourself to some king” (p. 55). The way Gillis saw it, Hythloday would not only be of great usefulness to the King, but he would also get a considerable profit out of it by being able to maintain himself and his relatives. Hythloday’s response is unmistakably direct from the beginning. He does not agree with Gillis’s assumption and the first explanation he provides is:

³⁶ Skinner, p. 217.

³⁷ Kristeller, p. 61.

³⁸ Skinner, p. 220.

³⁹ Kristeller, pp. 60-61.

⁴⁰ Skinner, p. 218.

⁴¹ <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> accessed on December 9, 2016.

As for my relatives and friends [...] I am not greatly troubled about them, for I think I have fairly well performed my duty to them already. The possessions, which other men do not resign unless they are old and sick and even then resign unwillingly when incapable of retention, I divided among my relatives and friends [...]. I think they ought to be satisfied with this generosity from me and not to require or expect additionally that I should, for their sakes, enter into servitude to kings. (p. 55)

To which Gillis makes a remarkable clarification: “I meant not that you should be in servitude, but in service to kings”, “the one is only one syllable less than the other” (p. 55), Hythloday replies. It is a significant choice of words, because Hythloday’s opinion on the matter is reflected perfectly, if only partially, in them. In fact, servitude and service are to the sailor almost equivalent, in terms of the cost they both require him to pay. The use he would allegedly have for the ruler does not outweigh the sacrifice he would be forced to make. In fact, in Hythloday’s opinion, the risk of compromising his integrity in order to be heard successfully by the monarch is too high. Moreover, as he says quite clearly, Hythloday could not even be tempted by the rewards he would obtain by the king: wealth has no appeal to him, and his integrity would always be more important. More has already hinted at Hythloday’s contempt for earthly wealth and for appearances when he describes his neglected attire (p. 51), and here the fact is further remarked by the character himself. As it has previously been pointed out, More himself was of very sober taste in clothing, completely opposite to Henry VIII’s lavish choices of wardrobe.⁴² Gillis does not desist:

Whatever name you give to this mode of life, that it is the very way by which you can not only profit people both as private individuals and as members of the commonwealth but also render your own condition more prosperous. (p.55)

The idea of personal advancement obviously seems appealing to Gillis and Morus, both intellectuals who had begun public careers, but has the opposite effect on Hythloday. In

⁴² Roberts, Jane, *Holbein and the Court of Henry VIII: Drawings and Miniatures from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle*, Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 1993, pp. 32-35.

his words, that is “a way that [his] soul abhors” (p. 57). Insisting on the negative aspect of serving the monarch Hythloday continues:

As it is, I live as I please, which I surely fancy is very seldom the case with your grand courtiers. Nay, there are plenty of persons who court the friendship of the great, and so you need not think it a great loss if they have to do without me and one or two others like me. (p. 57)

More reprises the concept of living according to *libertas*, found in Cicero’s *De Officiis*, and uses it to describe the unconventional Hythloday. Living at court implied following many rules and adapting to customs even if they seemed ridiculous or pointless. The philosopher, Hythloday in this case, refuses to bow to a social order that clashes with his ideals and thus chooses to remove himself from society and proceed in a solitary life of meditation.⁴³ This characterisation does not fit completely Hythloday, however, since he does feel a certain obligation towards society: he left Utopia motivated by a need to tell people in Europe about it. His reasons are connected with the critique he is making (he speaks of Utopia to prove how better it is than Europe), but it certainly is not a barren critique. It is meant to spur people to consider that a better government is possible somewhere else, independently from the inferences anyone can draw from it.⁴⁴ It is then time for Morus to intervene: he remarks how admirable and respectable it is of the sailor to reject any lust for wealth and power. And yet, he adds, it:

Seems [...] you will do what is worthy of you and of this generous and truly philosophical spirit of yours if you so order your life as to apply your talent and industry to the public interest, even if it involves some personal disadvantages to yourself. This you can never do with as great profit as if you are councillor to some great monarch and make him follow [...] straightforward and honourable courses. From the monarch, as from a never-failing spring, flows a stream of all that is good or evil over the whole nation. You possess such complete learning that, [...] you would make an excellent member of any king’s council. (p. 57)

⁴³ Nelson, N. E., “Cicero’s *De Officiis* in Christian Thought”, *University of Michigan Studies in Language and Literature*, 10 (1933), pp. 60-61.

⁴⁴ Baker, David Weil, *Divulging Utopia: Radical Humanism in Sixteenth-Century England*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999, pp. 44-45.

Morus' position comes off from his words almost as clearly as Hythloday's had from his speech. Morus shares the same values as the sailor, but deems the public good more important than the philosopher's own liberty, to a certain extent. He uses the word "disadvantage" purposefully, and the object of this minor sacrifice should be the "truly philosophical spirit" (p. 57) that, for Hythloday, cannot be sacrificed at all. What Morus is not willing to overlook instead is the extent of Hythloday's value as a philosopher. Someone so experienced and at the same time so learned would do a great offence to the people in refusing to collaborate with the monarch – not to mention the waste of talent in isolating in the "ivory tower".⁴⁵ Hythloday disagrees with the Englishman on one point in particular: he "should not promote the public interest" (p. 57). Monarchs, he argues, are more prone to deal with military affairs than to consider the best way of obtaining peace, and he has no experience in the former, hence no use as an advisor. The main objective of the rulers is to conquer new territories, rather than learn how to wisely govern those they already possess. Hythloday sees no use for his intellect in dealing with warmongering, a practice that he also despises. The greatest obstacle to his successful employment as a councillor, however, is of a different nature. The King alone, in fact, cannot take all the important decisions: he consults advisors on all the most sensitive matters. Unfortunately:

Among all royal councillors everyone is actually so wise as to have no need of profiting by another's council, or everyone seems so wise in his own eyes as not to condescend to profit by it, save that they agree with the most absurd saying of, and play the parasite to, the chief royal favourites whose friendliness they strive to win by flattery. (p. 57)

Hythloday paints an allusive portrait of the European courts of the time, and England in particular. His words are not simply impersonal statements, they convey a certain

⁴⁵ Skinner, p. 216.

frustration that is easy to identify with More's own frustration.⁴⁶ Hythloday mentions England specifically:

Such proud, ridiculous and obstinate prejudices I have encountered often in other places and once in England too. (p. 59)

Hythloday tells the significant anecdote about the conversation at the table of Cardinal Morton on the punishment of thieves. The importance of this digression lies in the description of the characters involved: Cardinal Morton, who is himself a councillor to the King, and the layman who is obviously trying to gain his favour. Assuming that Morton was in favour of the custom of hanging thieves in fact, the layman praises such practice and wonders that still so many poor resolve to steal. Hythloday, in all honesty, speaks his mind on the matter, providing validation for his opinions and reasonably questioning all the layman said:

You need not wonder, for this manner of punishing thieves goes beyond justice and is not for the public good. It is too harsh a penalty for theft and yet not a sufficient deterrent. Theft alone is not a grave offense that ought to be punished by death, and no penalty that can be devised is sufficient to restrain [...] those who have no other means of getting a livelihood. In this respect [...] a great part of our world resemble[s] bad schoolmasters, who would rather beat than teach their scholars. (p. 61)

Hythloday's argumentation is backed up by several examples and More's own expertise in law lies behind it.⁴⁷ After discussing death penalty for thieves (pp. 73-75) and the risks of enclosure (pp. 67-69) Hythloday is interrupted by the layman. The flatterer is trying to respond to Hythloday in a pretentious but pointless manner: repeating everything the sailor said to show off his own the memory skills, without actually bringing new facts to back up his argumentation. However, before the layman can begin his recapitulation, Cardinal Morton interrupts him. Picturing the Cardinal as a man that does not fall for

⁴⁶ Johnson, Robbin S., *More's "Utopia": Ideal and Illusion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969, pp. 56-57.

⁴⁷ Rudat, Wolfgang E. H., "Thomas More and Hythloday: Some Speculations on *Utopia*", *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 43 (1981), p. 124.

flattery, More is both complimenting his former patron and criticising adulators. The critique is even more evident in the passage that follows: Cardinal Morton rephrases what Hythloday had just said and his speech gains the opposite reaction from the people at his table. What had been deemed impossible and foolish is now greeted as the best of opinions merely in virtue of the speaker. The message is clear: people will not take a good piece of advice if they do not think it corresponds to the powerful man's opinion.⁴⁸ The anecdote continues with the introduction of another significant character: a parasite playing the fool. This man tries to make a joke on the provisions to be made against homeless people and says:

I should have a law passed that all those beggars be distributed and divided among the Benedictine monasteries and that the men be made so-called lay brothers. The women I should order to become nuns. (p. 83)

The Cardinal obviously detects the irony of such a statement and plays along, giving Hythloday the chance to remark once more how ready flatterers can be to adapt to the opinion of the object of their adulations. The elaborate anecdote, Hythloday tells Morus, served a specific purpose:

Look, my dear More, with how lengthy a tale I have burdened you. [...] This conversation I had to relate [...] to exhibit the attitude of those who had rejected what I had said first yet who, immediately afterward, when the Cardinal did not disapprove of it, also gave their approval, flattering him so much that they even smiled. From this reaction, you may judge what little regard courtiers would pay to me and my advice. (p. 85)

However, the description provided of John Morton seems to invalidate – at least in part – Hythloday's assumption. The Cardinal is, indeed, a councillor and he has been characterised as a wise man willing to hear honest opinions that are not motivated by a desire to please the listener. More seems here to argue that:

The fact that a man like Morton can, if only occasionally, rise to power mean[s] that it is worthwhile, in at least some cases, for an intellectual to enter the political arena.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Johnson, p. 60.

⁴⁹ Logan, p. 47.

Obviously, it must not be forgotten that More was paying a tribute to the real-life Cardinal Morton, thus a eulogy is to be expected and its truthfulness could be accepted with some reserves. And yet, it holds some validity in the debate because Morton should be taken simply as an example for a wider category, regardless of his specific reality.⁵⁰ He represents the category of virtuous men who believed their knowledge could be of use to the monarch, and More was part of it. The biggest flaw in Hythloday's position then appears to be his rigidity, his unwillingness to admit there is a middle ground on which some good can be done, despite the corruption of the majority of councillors. Morus, in fact, is far from persuaded, and his main counter argument relies on the concept of duty:

I cannot change my mind but must needs think that, if you could persuade yourself not to shun the courts of kings, you could do the greatest good to the common weal by your advice. The latter is the most important part of your duty as it is the duty of every good man. Your favourite author, Plato, is of opinion that commonwealths will finally be happy only if either philosophers become kings or kings turn to philosophy. What a distant prospect of happiness there will be if philosophers will not condescend even to impart their counsel to kings! (p. 87)

The philosophical concept that worth resides in action is employed by Morus to justify his and Gillis's insistence on the problem of counsel.⁵¹ And yet, Hythloday is adamant in his reply, and instead of confuting or refusing the comparison with Plato's *Republic*, he turns it to his own advantage. In fact, he replies:

Plato was right in foreseeing that if kings themselves did not turn to philosophy, they would never approve of the advice of real philosophers because they have been from their youth saturated and infected with wrong ideas. [...] If I proposed beneficial measures to some king and tried to uproot from his soul the seeds of evil and corruption, do you not suppose that I should be forthwith banished or treated with ridicule? (p. 87)

⁵⁰ Campbell, W. E., *More's Utopia and His Social Teaching*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1930, pp. 36-39.

⁵¹ Trapp, p. 58.

This prompts him to provide an effective example. “Suppose” he asks “I were at the court of the French king” (p. 87). The picture he paints to prove his case works brilliantly: at the French King’s Privy Council meeting the order of the day is foreign policy. However:

What foreign policy turns out to mean is a collection of stratagems through which the French king can get his hands on as much of other ruler’s territory as possible.⁵²

The members of the Council offer many suggestions on how to achieve such a goal, and none of them is reasonable or fair. More’s audience, reading the catalogue of the French King’s ambitions and the list of proposals by his advisors, could easily take it as a reconstruction of real events.⁵³ In fact, France did adopt some of the stratagems listed by More, thus the critique bears even more meaning. Hythloday then moves on to describe a hypothetical council on domestic affairs. Once more, the list of solution proposed by the advisors corresponds roughly to the practices of European rulers. Those are effective in “heap[ing] up treasure” (p. 91) for the King and do not look at the country’s welfare. Above the rest, the advisors all promote warmongering against several other countries, including England. Such examples support Hythloday’s decision not to serve any monarch. In fact, they are quite accurate representations, which makes them “effective as theoretical models” as well.⁵⁴ In such contexts, Hythloday argues, he could not possibly succeed in offering a different kind of advice.

When so many distinguished persons are vying with each other in proposals of a warlike nature, what if an insignificant fellow like myself were to get up and advise going on another track? (p. 89)

Hythloday, to prove his point, uses the case of the Achorians⁵⁵, a population “on the mainland to the south-southeast of the island of Utopia” (p. 89). The Achorians had

⁵² Logan, p. 67.

⁵³ Russel, Conrad, *The Crisis of Parliaments. English History 1509-1660*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 135-138.

⁵⁴ Logan, p. 70.

⁵⁵ A fictional name meaning “Without land”. Due to its geographical location, this population could be identified with the French.

conquered another kingdom after a war but had soon realised that maintaining both the newly-conquered and their own was too difficult. They proceeded to cautiously advise their king to choose to keep one or the other, instead of dividing his care and ending up neglecting them both. The example is meant to prove how selfless and right-minded political councillors can benefit the kingdom, and yet Hythloday claims that, in France, such an unpopular opinion would never be accepted. Hythloday's advice embodies that which More would have desired to offer to the King. At the same time, however, More is saying that such advice is not applicable in the political context of the time, chiefly because of the institution of kingship and that of council.⁵⁶ What had worked for the Acorians, is destined to fail in France:

Furthermore, suppose I proved that all this warmongering [...] would [...] at length by some mischance end in naught and that therefore he had better look after his ancestral kingdom and make it as prosperous and flourishing as possible. [...] What reception from my listeners, my dear More, do you think this speech of mine would find? (p. 91)

In the *Dialogue of Counsel*, nobody is able to “shake Hythloday out of his original conviction”, which he supports with many argumentations.⁵⁷ What lies beneath both Morus and Hythloday's opposite opinions is part of the “essence of the humanist message”.⁵⁸ In fact, the concept that government should aim to the achievement of the highest degree of virtue, theorised by Erasmus in *The Education of a Christian Prince*, was shared by many Northern humanists. Virtue was given a central place in political life. This was due mainly to the assumption that virtue, acting as a guide, would help eliminate corruption and self-interest.⁵⁹ Both of these are generated by pride which, according to More, is “the chief and progenitor of all plagues” (p. 243) of the government, which

⁵⁶ Logan, p. 74.

⁵⁷ Skinner, p. 218.

⁵⁸ Skinner, p. 231.

⁵⁹ Grafton, Anthony and Jardine, Lisa, *From Humanism to the Humanities*, London: Duckworth, 1986, pp. 114-115.

should try to preserve its order and harmony instead. Moreover, they also believed that the monarch should represent this “virtue in its highest and purest form”.⁶⁰ Consequently, the question of servitude became a central one, and in the *Dialogue of Counsel* Hythloday is merely assessing the pointlessness in pursuing those ideals that Morus is instead defending. Hythloday, in fact, believes that “a pretext can never be wanting for deciding on the king’s side” (p. 93), which implies the impossibility of honest advice. The sailor provides then another example, that of the Macarians (the Blessed), “a people not very far distant from Utopia” (p. 97). To prevent greed and inequality, they make the new monarch take an oath on the day of his coronation. He must never “have more than a thousand pounds of gold” (p. 97). “Such a king”, Hythloday says:

will be both a terror to the evil and beloved by the good. To sum it up, if I tried to obtrude these and like ideas on men strongly inclined to the opposite way of thinking, to what deaf ears should I tell the tale!” (p. 97)

Nothing could be “more frustrating or futile” than trying to make “the king amend his own indolence and arrogance where everyone else is busy puffing them up”.⁶¹ The question of servitude clarifies “the relationship between *Utopia* and the tradition of political theory, and the nature and significance of More’s own contribution to it”.⁶²

It is not simple to determine More’s position on this subject. Rather than aligning More with either Morus or Hythloday though, the problematic part is the author’s opinion on the debate itself. More did not give the readers any clear evidence that they should, after reading *Utopia*, clearly prefer Hythloday or Morus. *Utopia* remains a “puzzling work, with a depth of irony which is sometimes hard to gauge” and a tone which is not

⁶⁰ Erasmus, Desiderius, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, edited by Lester K. Born, New York: Octagon Books, 1968, pp. 187-189.

⁶¹ Greenblatt, p. 35.

⁶² Logan, p. 74.

easily understood.⁶³ All things considered, however, we cannot be completely sure that More intended any of *Utopia* to be taken seriously.⁶⁴

4.3 A possible solution: another philosophy

In the *Dialogue of Counsel*, Hythloday's opinion seems to present the more convincing argumentation and, given the credibility of the character, his speech is very persuasive.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, after the sailor concludes his defence with the memorable statement "to what deaf ears should I tell the tale!" (p. 97), it is Morus' turn to further his opinion. He begins by acknowledging the truth in Hythloday's words: "deaf indeed, without doubt, and [...] I am not surprised" (pp. 97-99.). However, Morus soon makes a crucial remark:

Neither, to tell the truth, do I think that such ideas should be thrust on people, or should advice given, as you are positive will never be listened to. What good could such novel ideas do, or how could they enter the minds of individuals who are already taken up and possessed by the opposite conviction? (p. 99)

Morus introduces an important concept in the debate: the adaptability of speech. It would make no sense, he argues, to insist on a message that cannot be conveyed as it is, because nobody would listen to it. It is also true, he continues, that advice could probably be more useful and effective if rephrased or adapted. And, if it is possible to get the message through, would not that be the most important thing? The context and the impact of the message are here questioned, not the fact that the message should be conveyed at all.⁶⁶

As for the context, Morus reflects:

In the private conversations of close friends this academic philosophy is not without its charm, but in the council of kings, where great matters are debated with great authority, there is no room for these notions. (p. 99)

⁶³ Skinner, p. 256.

⁶⁴ Lewis, pp. 167-169.

⁶⁵ Logan, p. 33.

⁶⁶ Bevington, David M., "The Dialogue in *Utopia*: Two Sides to the Question", *Studies in Philology*, 58 (1961), p. 502.

So, if advice is to be provided in a Prince's council, how should that be done? According to Hythloday, it should not, it is pointless: "there is no room for philosophy with rulers" (p. 99). In Morus' opinion though, it is not only possible, but actually advisable. The advisor only needs to pay attention to the words he uses and to the revolutionary meaning of the message. It is nothing short of foolish "to thrust radical ideas upon individuals who cannot possibly be expected to accept them or even consider them seriously".⁶⁷ Compromise and adaptability seem to be the key elements in Morus' vision. In fact, Morus advocates the possibility of adopting "another philosophy" (p. 99) in dealing with the question of state service. It is different from Hythloday's "academic philosophy, which thinks that everything is suitable to every place" (p. 99). Morus describes a philosophy:

More practical for statesmen, which knows its stage, adapts itself to the play in hand, and performs its role neatly and appropriately. (p. 99).

The key point is the fact that this philosophy, unlike Hythloday's radical rigidity, is effective and does perform its duty. As previously argued, humanists perceived it as their duty to offer their knowledge and experience to the monarch: here Morus is reiterating the same ideal, pointing out how adaptability is more useful in achieving what any philosopher should aspire to.⁶⁸ Morus makes an interesting comparison, insisting on the theatrical metaphor:

Otherwise we have the situation in which a comedy of Plautus is being performed and [...] then you come onstage in a philosopher's attire and recite the passage from the *Octavia* where Seneca is disputing with Nero. Would it not have been preferable to take a part without words than, by reciting something inappropriate, to make a hodgepodge of comedy and tragedy? You would have spoiled and upset the actual play by bringing in irrelevant matter – even if your contribution would have been superior in itself. (p. 99)

⁶⁷ Greenblatt, p. 35.

⁶⁸ Lehmberg, 1961, pp. 82-83.

There is no doubt that Hythloday has the best advice to offer in any situation. However, since the majority of people, and that includes the rulers, are not receptive to such high matters, those should not be imposed on them: such ideas would turn out to be ridiculous and out of place, and also ineffective. On the contrary, accommodating to the present context, the “play in hand” (p. 99) is a strategy that can succeed more easily in the task. What is interesting to notice is that More insists in defining the context of state service, and that includes the Tudor court, as a stage where a play is performed. In fact, he did realise how exaggerated, pompous, even absurd at times, the conventions of the court were. More disliked these “ceremonies of power”⁶⁹ but he tolerated them and played his own part at court. As one of More’s biographers, Nicholas Harpsfield, pointed out:

Sir Thomas More was in a manner forced, contrary to his sober and well-known modest nature, to play a part to accommodate himself somewhat to the players in this foolish, fond stage play.⁷⁰

Morus does not deny Hythloday’s premise: the conditions are far from ideal for anyone wishing to provide right-minded advice to the monarch. The innovation he adds is that one should not focus on the premise, but on the way the message is delivered. Where Hythloday’s philosophy would have implied sound philosophical advice, radically opposed to any of the king’s indulgences, Morus proposes a more accommodating conduct. In the words of Morus:

Whatever play is being performed, perform it as best you can, and do not upset it all simply because you think of another which has more interest. So it is in the commonwealth. So it is in the deliberations of monarchs. If you cannot pluck up wrongheaded opinions by the root, if you cannot cure according to your heart’s desire vices of long standing, yet you must not on that account desert the commonwealth. You must not abandon the ship in a storm because you cannot control the winds. (p. 99)

⁶⁹ Greenblatt, p. 15.

⁷⁰ Harpsfield, Nicholas, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore, Knight, sometymes Lord High Chancellor of England*, edited by Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock, New York: Early English Text Society, 1963, p. 38.

What Morus proposes is, in other words, to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation (the “storm” that Morus refers to) and act accordingly. A humanist’s duty is to craft advice that is appealing to the ruler and will at the same time guide him towards fair and balanced decisions. A philosopher’s knowledge and experience will go to waste, Morus argues, if he does not accommodate them, and consequently his personality, to a level that would be accepted by the monarch. The main idea underlying this attitude is that contributing to the betterment of society, even if only in a small quantity, is morally superior than isolating oneself completely due to the impossibility of achieving great results. Morus firmly believes so:

You must not force upon people new and strange ideas which you realise will carry no weight with persons of opposite convictions. On the contrary, by the indirect approach you must seek and strive to the best of your power to handle matters tactfully. What you cannot turn to good you must make as little bad as you can. (pp. 99-101)

Morus clarifies that he does not say so out of naivety: he knows that “it is impossible that all should be well unless all men were good” (p. 101). But then again, he insists on the possibility of a different approach, a tactful one. In this context, he believes, this is the best and most considered way of handling the situation. Morus is at least as persuasive as Hythloday in his arguments, and his words could easily hide More’s justification of his future service at court.⁷¹

Hythloday, however, does not seem to agree with these statements. The sailor thinks that Morus “espouses the blandly banal approach to the problem of counsel embodied in [...] works as *The Education of a Christian Prince*”.⁷² The theory presented in such works can be summarised in two main conditions that correspond to what Hythloday repeats in the *Dialogue of Counsel*. Firstly, rulers should be uncorrupted and,

⁷¹ Surtz, Edward L., *The Praise of Pleasure: Philosophy, Education, and Communism in More’s Utopia*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957, pp. 65-66.

⁷² Logan, p. 66.

consequently, predisposed to receive fair advice. Secondly, humanists should see it as their duty to offer their knowledge in the form of disinterested advice.⁷³ However, the first condition “is not within the power of the humanists to implement”.⁷⁴ This fact, to Hythloday, is sufficient to reject the second point of the theory completely. He fails to see, however, that what Morus proposes (accommodating “to the play in hand”, p. 99) is substantially different. This is because, to the sailor, the idea of adapting and accommodating automatically implies a sort of corruption of the humanist’s principles. Such a conduct, to Hythloday, appears more despicable because it is hidden behind the mask of public service, when in reality the only benefits are for the advisors.⁷⁵ The consequences, the sailor thinks, are only negative: the councillor will fail to accomplish any good and will lose his liberty and his virtue, contaminated by the vices of the court. Moreover, he will be deprived of his peace and quiet if he spends time with those flatterers and ill advisors that normally surround the king. Hythloday compares his advice to what Christ had preached: their ideas sound “unusual and absurd” (p. 101). In fact, on one hand, it is impossible, if an intellectual wants to tell only the truth, to speak in a different manner. On the other hand, lying is not suitable either for a philosopher such as Hythloday (p. 101). That leaves, the sailor says, only one option: giving up on the idea of becoming a councillor. The grounds on which Hythloday rejects Morus’ method are two. First of all, he says, if he does not conform his opinion to that of the king and the advisors, it “would amount to having none at all” (p. 101). If, on the other hand, he decided to think like the councillors, he would “help their madness” (p. 103). Once again, the sailor fails

⁷³ Hexter, J. H., “Intention, Words, and Meaning: The Case of More’s *Utopia*”, *New Literary History*, 6 (1975), pp. 532-533.

⁷⁴ Logan, p. 66.

⁷⁵ Greenblatt, pp. 35-36.

to acknowledge the subtlety of Morus' approach and the results it may bring. In fact, he comments:

By this approach [...] I should accomplish nothing else than to share the madness of others as I tried to cure their lunacy. (p. 101)

Not only, however, is dissimulating dangerous for the integrity of the philosopher. His own life can be at risk, if he refuses to bend. As Hythloday states:

At court there is no room for dissembling, nor may one shut one's eyes to things. One must openly approve the worst counsels and subscribe to the most ruinous decrees. He would be counted [...] a traitor, who gives only faint praise to evil counsels. (p. 103)

Actually, More himself experienced this a few years after writing about it, when Henry VIII demanded his response on the Great Matter.⁷⁶ When he was first approached on the matter, More was able to provide an acceptable reason for his abstention. He acted with diplomacy and employed his great experience of courtly affairs and his personal knowledge of the King. As previously seen, he never accepted plainly the monarch's plan to divorce, and yet he managed to ascribe the final decision on the question to higher authorities, de facto detaching himself from the task.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, after Henry's frustration grew due to Wolsey's failures, dissimulating would do the Lord Chancellor no good anymore.

Hythloday's opinion on Morus' different philosophy is plainly stated by the sailor:

There is no chance for you to do any good because you are brought among colleagues who would easily corrupt even the best of men before being reformed themselves. By their evil companionship, either you will be seduced yourself or, keeping your own integrity and innocence, you will be made a screen for the wickedness and folly of others. Thus you are far from being able to make anything better by that indirect approach of yours. (p. 103)

It should be noted also that Hythloday does perceive the potential value of his knowledge:

Although that speech of mine might perhaps be unwelcome and disagreeable to those councillors, yet I cannot see why it should seem odd even to the point

⁷⁶ Guy, p. 153.

⁷⁷ Unable to support the king in his attempts to break his marriage, More left that issue to Wolsey and the canon lawyers, and occupied himself with the legal matters associated with the duchy of Lancaster and with fighting the spread of heresy. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/> accessed on December 9, 2016.

of folly. [...] What did my speech contain that would not be appropriate or obligatory to have propounded everywhere? (p. 101)

Moreover, Hythloday plainly states that he only left Utopia, where he had found the perfect commonwealth and the ideal life conditions, for a precise reason. That is, “to make known that new world” (p. 107). It could be argued, then, that this final statement undermines in part what he has claimed so far: he does think that his knowledge, namely his first-hand experience of Utopian customs, can be useful to others.⁷⁸ However, it must be highlighted that the sailor talks to Gillis and Morus, like-minded humanists and therefore a closed circle of listeners.⁷⁹ This underlines the fundamentally elitist nature of early Tudor humanism, in spite of its stress on education. It is Gillis first, and then Morus, who suggest his knowledge of Utopia to be shared with a monarch as well. Hythloday embodies the ideal of the secluded intellectual, the detached philosopher living in the ivory tower, willing to let only his fellow humanists enter it.⁸⁰ This, arguably, can refer to *Utopia* as well: it was intended for a circle of humanists and, even if less-educated people were to read it, the real message (much like Hythloday’s advice) would still be unintelligible to them and this is made clear in More’s words against printing.

As anticipated, More does not provide a solution to the Question of Servitude. Hythloday seems adamant in his convictions as much as Morus is not persuaded by them. Book 1 ends with the sailor’s agreement to further his case by describing how Utopia can boast such a perfect commonwealth: thanks to the elimination of greed (and private property) and, in general, the correct education of the citizens. However, apart from inspiring those who hear about it, the description of Utopia can do little more. In fact, if the impossibility of achieving a perfect form of government depends on the vices of the

⁷⁸ Johnson, p. 74.

⁷⁹ Logan, pp. 254-255.

⁸⁰ Skinner, p. 216.

population, then Morus' course of action is more advisable. It is not realistic to believe that the conditions can be changed, which is Hythloday's prime objection to choosing contemplative life over active life. Morus himself admits:

It is impossible that all should be well unless all men were good, a situation which I do not expect for a great many years to come. (p. 101).

Therefore, it could only be considered honourable to enter the service of a king to try to achieve something, however small, for the common good.⁸¹

What should be discussed is whether More's approach, the indirect philosophy he actually employed throughout his years at court, did bring some positive results, did contribute to "make as little bad" (p. 101) as possible. Undoubtedly, Henry VIII proved to be a difficult monarch, governed by his passions and desires rather than by a disinterested strife for the common good.⁸² What More, or anybody else, could never question though, was the king's supremacy and the devotion owed to him. In Thomas More's view, his choices and behaviour, I argue, determined a wise course of action. More's intelligence, expertise, wisdom and ambition allowed him to flourish at Henry's service. It should not be neglected that, despite the monarch's descent towards tyranny, Henry's reign also determined England's growth to a powerful country in the European political context.⁸³ More, rising to the highest spheres of the court, managed to secure several successes on behalf of the monarch. As ambassador, for example, he stipulated a commercial treaty during the Flanders embassy, which would last over a decade.⁸⁴ Neither should it be forgotten that More's employment brought many benefits to him and

⁸¹ Skinner, p. 234.

⁸² Brigden, Susan, *New World, Lost Worlds. The Rule of the Tudors, 1485-1603*, London: The Penguin Press, 2000, pp. 36-38.

⁸³ McGurk, John, *The Tudor Monarchies, 1485-1603*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 37-40.

⁸⁴ Ormrod, David, *The Rise of Commercial Empires: England and Netherlands in the Age of Mercantilism, 1650-1770*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 20-23.

his family as well. His career rose rapidly and, at a quite young age, he reached some of the highest-ranking offices and was entrusted with great responsibilities. Moreover, as previously stated, More embarked on his public career with a fair share of optimism and believing that his presence and work would be relevant. Finally, and it is not an aspect that should be neglected, Thomas More was truly fond of the King and, for most of his life at court, they had a privileged relationship that went beyond mere servitude. Despite all this, however, More clearly perceived the corruption of the Tudor court and felt trapped in it.⁸⁵ Hence the relevance of the topic of this thesis: since More discussed the Question of Servitude as early as in 1516, it is safe to assume that, at least in part, he already knew the issue would be relevant to his own experience with Henry VIII.

The outcome, or rather the lack thereof, is even more emblematic. More lived his role at court fully, engaging himself in the political life, despite the cost he had to pay.⁸⁶ All in all, though, the breaking point arrived only with the problem of the divorce. Up to that point, Thomas More was able to actually contribute to the King's decisions and do his part properly, just as Morus describes it, without any illusion. He successfully, and in more than one instance, contrasted some of those evil councillors, such as Cromwell and Wolsey. This makes his contribution more than valid and, consequently, gives a positive balance to his choice of action. Finally, when he chose to resign from the Chancellorship and thus, in some way, conform to Hythloday's aloofness, he took this decision after a great deal of reflection. More had done his part in contributing to the common good, and so he could afford to die for what he considered most sacred.⁸⁷ When he was about to face imprisonment and execution, indeed, he told his son-in-law William Roper: "My

⁸⁵ Greenblatt, pp. 29-31.

⁸⁶ Elton, p. 344.

⁸⁷ Elton, p. 354.

dear son, thank God, the battle is won".⁸⁸ In conclusion, it could be said that Thomas More eventually embodied both Morus and Hythloday, and the message he wanted to convey was not in favour of one opinion instead of another. Rather, it could be argued that his idea of a solution was less clean-cut and more like a process. As a young ambassador beginning his career at court, More needed to be like Morus, otherwise his knowledge and skills would have been wasted. As an older man, however, after a long career of service, and when matters as important as the separation from the church were at stake, he could allow himself to be as adamant and incorruptible as Hythloday.

⁸⁸ Roper, William, *Vita di Tommaso Moro*, edited by Joseph Cinquino, Naples: M. D'Auria Editore, 1968, p. 84.

Italian Summary

Il fulcro di questa tesi è un'analisi del primo libro di *Utopia* di Thomas More. In particolare, viene preso in esame il dibattito tra Raphael Hythloday e Morus, alter ego di More. Oggetto di questo dialogo è la questione del ruolo dell'intellettuale, dell'umanista, del filosofo come consigliere del re. Da una parte, il personaggio di Hythloday, pur riconoscendo l'utilità del sapere e dell'esperienza che solo un umanista possiede, rigetta la convenzione, tipica dell'umanesimo civico, del servizio al sovrano. Dall'altra, Morus, sostenuto da un terzo interlocutore, Pieter Gillis, difende tale convenzione in virtù dei considerevoli benefici che il governo ne trarrebbe.

Culla della cultura umanista fu senza dubbio l'Italia e da qui, in seguito, il nuovo movimento si diffuse nel Nord Europa. Elemento fondante dell'attività degli umanisti era lo studio, in seguito alla riscoperta, dei classici latini e greci. Dietro a questa pratica c'era la convinzione che, nei testi di suddetti autori, fossero insite certe virtù indispensabili all'uomo. Gli umanisti, pertanto, si attribuivano il compito di rendere tali contenuti accessibili all'umanità, nei confronti della quale, in opposizione alla concezione teocentrica del Medioevo, nutrivano una grande fiducia. Il ruolo dell'intellettuale quindi iniziò a trasformarsi: se prima il sapere era quasi esclusivamente competenza degli ecclesiastici, ora diventava il mezzo tramite il quale l'umanista contribuiva all'edificazione morale dell'uomo. Dunque gli umanisti molto spesso si dedicavano ad imponenti opere filologiche e di traduzione dal greco (ancora praticamente sconosciuto in Europa) dando vita a numerose edizioni critiche. Non di rado, data la loro capacità nel redigere documenti e atti, gli umanisti occupavano cariche di segretari e cancellieri, sviluppando così un forte legame con la politica. Il genere degli *specula principum*, manuali pensati per i governanti, veniva di frequente ripreso e uno dei temi più ricorrenti

era proprio quello del ruolo dell'intellettuale nei confronti del governo, in continuità col dibattito di origine classica tra vita attiva e contemplativa.

Per quanto riguarda l'Inghilterra, terra natale di More, il contatto con le idee e i concetti dell'Umanesimo, in particolare quello civile, avviene in forma tutt'altro che sporadica ed infertile. Il curriculum degli *studia humanitatis* comprendeva grammatica, storia, poesia, retorica, filosofia morale e, soprattutto, lo studio degli autori della classicità latina e greca. Già nel '400, molti umanisti italiani esportavano lo studio a livello universitario del latino e del greco negli atenei stranieri, determinando così la diffusione del *curriculum* umanistico anche oltre i confini della penisola. In Inghilterra, il pioniere di questa tendenza fu Pietro dal Monte, giunto a Londra su ordine del Papa e rimasto per cinque anni. Durante quel periodo compose il primo trattato umanista su suolo inglese ma, soprattutto, divenne parte del circolo di Humphrey, Duca di Gloucester, considerato il primo mecenate inglese dell'Umanesimo.

D'altra parte, il contatto avveniva anche nella maniera opposta: numerosi studenti inglesi soggiornavano nelle principali città universitarie della penisola. Inizialmente si trattava di giovani che sceglievano le prestigiose università italiane per dedicarsi a discipline quali la medicina o la giurisprudenza. Ben presto, tuttavia, gli *studia humanitatis* iniziarono a prendere piede e conquistare nuovi discepoli. Numerosi furono i casi di studenti che scelsero di intraprendere tale indirizzo abbandonando gli studi iniziali. Un esempio è Thomas Linacre, che si trasferì a Padova per studiare medicina per poi appassionarsi agli *studia humanitatis* che proseguì presso le università di Venezia, Roma e Firenze. Molti di questi, una volta terminati gli studi ed affinate le proprie abilità letterarie e filologiche, rientravano in patria per occupare, in molti casi, cattedre universitarie. Lo stesso Thomas More, durante i suoi anni ad Oxford, ebbe come

insegnanti due illustri umanisti che avevano passato lunghi periodi in Italia, grazie ai quali si appassionò agli *studia humanitatis*: Grocyn e Linacre.

Non a caso, infatti, *Utopia* può essere considerata un trattato umanistico in piena regola. Affini all'umanesimo sono le tematiche trattate, la scelta della composizione in Latino, la forma dialogica e anche molte delle convenzioni stilistiche adoperate da More. Composta tra il 1515 e il 1516, *Utopia* è considerata il capolavoro di More, nonostante le difficoltà che si riscontrano nella sua interpretazione. Thomas More, all'epoca avvocato già affermato che si accingeva a cominciare una promettente carriera alla corte di Enrico VIII, scrisse il libro 2 mentre si trovava in missione diplomatica nelle Fiandre. La descrizione minuziosa delle leggi e dei costumi dell'isola di Utopia è contenuta completamente in questo libro, raccontata attraverso le parole di Raphael Hythloday, marinaio portoghese appena rientrato in Europa. Al lettore che non conosceva il greco sfuggivano due dettagli tutt'altro che trascurabili: Utopia significa *Non-luogo*, Hythloday *Spaccia-bugie*. More stava così stabilendo e al contempo negando l'esistenza di un luogo dove la perfetta forma di governo vige ed è efficace. L'ironia era senz'altro parte del progetto di More in quanto convenzione umanistica: lo stesso autore si era dedicato, in gioventù, alla traduzione di alcune opere satiriche di Luciano, del quale apprezzava le sottigliezze ironiche. Tuttavia, si trattava anche di un'oculata scelta politica: Utopia è un chiaro termine di paragone per l'Inghilterra del tempo, tanto che le due isole si somigliano dal punto di vista geografico. Questo implicito paragone però vedeva la terra natale di More indubbiamente sconfitta e i suoi mali esposti dalle critiche mirate di Hythloday, il quale aveva lì soggiornato per qualche tempo. Sarebbe stato alquanto rischioso, per More, comporre un trattato di critica sociale privo di questa cornice narrativa fantastica che invece è presente in *Utopia*. Durante il regno di Enrico VIII, infatti, le tensioni a corte

erano molto alte, e perdere il favore del monarca significava spesso la morte. D'altra parte, chiunque desiderasse fare carriera vedeva nel circolo dei più intimi del re il modo più efficace: era parte del programma politico del sovrano Tudor rendere la corte inglese un centro culturale degno di competere con gli analoghi europei.

Proprio in virtù di queste condizioni, il libro 1 di *Utopia* assume un significato molto interessante. Tornato a Londra dopo la missione diplomatica, More lo scrisse come preambolo alla narrazione del libro 2: vengono presentati i personaggi e create le condizioni per il loro dialogo. Hythloday decide infatti di parlare di Utopia in seguito ad un acceso dibattito con Morus e Pieter Gillis. Secondo il marinaio, i due umanisti non riescono a concordare con lui perché non sono mai stati ad Utopia e non ne conoscono le leggi e il governo. La questione sulla quale le loro opinioni divergono altro non è che quella del ruolo dell'intellettuale a corte. Dopo aver dimostrato la sua sapienza ed esperienza infatti, Hythloday viene interrogato da Gillis sul suo rifiuto di entrare nel Consiglio Privato di qualche sovrano. Sembrerebbe infatti che il marinaio posseda tutte le qualità necessarie ad adempiere a questo compito con grandi benefici sia per lui che per il reggente. Tuttavia, Hythloday ribatte, si tratta di un tentativo futile: il suo consiglio, per quanto retto e basato su ottimi principi, non potrebbe mai essere accettato da un sovrano. Colui che è a capo di una monarchia assoluta infatti, per contrastare le proprie tendenze tiranniche, dovrebbe circondarsi di persone pronte ad offrire consigli spassionati e senza secondi fini. La realtà, sfortunatamente, è ben diversa: le corti pullulano di parassiti ed adulatori, desiderosi di ottenere il favore del re offrendo consigli che altro non sono se non specchi per le allodole. Proponendo al sovrano stratagemmi di politica aggressiva, volti spesso alla conquista di nuovi territori con la guerra, anziché alla giusta amministrazione di quelli già posseduti, essi si comprano la benevolenza del sovrano

senza portare al regno alcun aiuto. Qualora esponesse le proprie sagge idee, Hythloday verrebbe ignorato o deriso, conformandosi agli altri consiglieri invece ne verrebbe corrotto. Molto meglio, a suo parere, che l'intellettuale si distacchi completamente dai vizi della corte e viva a modo suo, secondo le proprie regole e in libertà.

Morus, pur concedendo che le premesse sulla pericolosità degli adulatori sono vere, contesta Hythloday riguardo alla strategia. Effettivamente è inutile tentare di imporre modelli di così elevata rettitudine morale in tali ambienti: queste scelte, sempre le più impopolari, verrebbero sempre e comunque rifiutate a favore delle ben più allettanti proposte degli adulatori. Tuttavia, esiste per l'umanista un'altra filosofia da provare: una via di mezzo tra le assolute idee di Hythloday e i gusti corrotti dei re, una sorta di compromesso. Il concetto di fondo nella proposta di Morus è semplice: qualora sia impossibile e irrealizzabile ottenere un'ideale forma di governo, non è forse più onorevole fare del proprio meglio per limitare il male che gli altri causano? Adattarsi alla situazione, mediare l'intensità dei propri consigli, riuscire a comunicare con i governanti è sicuramente una strategia con maggiori possibilità di successo rispetto all'intransigenza del marinaio. La risposta finale di Hythloday però è un ulteriore rifiuto di ciò che Morus propone. Adattarsi è ai suoi occhi sinonimo di corrompersi: trattare con personaggi immorali porterebbe inevitabilmente a due conseguenze disastrose. Innanzitutto, il filosofo perderebbe la sua integrità e comprometterebbe i propri principi. Di conseguenza, uniformandosi sempre più agli altri adulatori, la portata virtuosa dei suoi consigli andrebbe affievolendosi fino a diventare inutile. Data l'impossibilità di giungere ad una soluzione, Hythloday decide di illustrare nel dettaglio il caso di Utopia: un governo che funziona bene perché le persone, prive del sentimento dell'avidità e senza conoscere la proprietà privata, sono ben disposte a seguire le leggi.

La questione della servitù discussa da More assume una rilevanza notevole specialmente se confrontata con la sua stessa vita. Le due opinioni opposte personificate da Hythloday e Morus sembrano rappresentare il conflitto dello stesso autore alla vigilia della sua ascesa politica. Da un lato, le ambizioni del brillante avvocato genuinamente convinto dell'utilità di un umanista a corte e, dall'altro, il rifiuto spirituale di un uomo profondamente credente di tutto ciò che la corte Tudor rappresentava: corruzione, opulenza, avidità e sprechi. Per vent'anni di carriera al fianco di Enrico VIII, More si comportò come Morus: seppe adattarsi all'ambiente difficile e precario e riuscì a mantenere intatti molti dei suoi principi, pur partecipando attivamente alle decisioni del sovrano. Arrivato a ricoprire il ruolo di Lord Cancelliere, si ritrovò nella scomoda posizione di braccio destro del re proprio nel momento in cui questi stava varcando una linea di non ritorno: la separazione da Roma. Dopo un iniziale tentativo di agire diplomaticamente e non dover così contrastare il re, More decise di dimettersi dall'incarico e, ritiratosi a vita privata, sperava di non subire ripercussioni. Sfortunatamente, al momento dell'Atto di Supremazia, era inaccettabile per il re che un uomo influente come More non si schierasse apertamente dalla sua parte. In seguito al suo chiaro rifiuto di sottoporsi al giuramento, More fu incarcerato e poi decapitato come traditore. Si può dire così che, nel momento in cui il fondamento della sua fede e della sua morale venne minacciato dagli eccessi tirannici di Enrico VIII, More assunse la rigidità di Hythloday e rifiutò di piegarsi.

Alla luce di questa analisi e di questo paragone si potrebbe quindi ammettere che More non fosse a favore di una delle due posizioni in modo assoluto. Al contrario, le scelte compiute nel corso della sua carriera sembrano dimostrare che, a suo parere, la soluzione migliore fosse una sintesi tra le due parti, quasi un processo. Infatti, pur avendo

scelto l'altra filosofia di Morus nel corso degli anni alla corte Tudor, rimanendo fedele servitore del re, nel momento dell'Atto di Supremazia More si ancorò alla sua fede e ai suoi principi alla maniera di Hythloday.

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