

Philosophic Designs: Dialogical Details in *Utopia*, Book 1

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One way to shed light upon Raphael Hythlodæus' political vision in Book 2 of *Utopia* is to examine details of its dialogical context found in Book 1. By considering the character of the interlocutors, the tales told in their conversation, and the subject matter and general course of the dialogue, we gain valuable insight into the way Thomas More chose to frame the Utopian vision of Book 2. This framing is no mere window dressing, but rather serves to orient the reader's reception and assessment of the political tale of *Utopia*.

In broadest outline, of course, *Utopia* is presented as a written recollection of a day's conversation in Antwerp. Thomas More, the author, relates from memory conversations he, the character Morus, had with Peter Giles and Raphael Hythlodæus on the best state of a commonwealth and the new island of *Utopia*.¹ When we consider the two chief interlocutors, Morus and Hythlodæus, we find that their words and deeds reveal markedly different ways of life. Morus is a man of many

¹ Although others are present—such as John Clement, who is mentioned in the prefatory letter from More to Giles—the only speakers in the written dialogue are Morus, Giles, and Hythlodæus. (NB: In what follows, “More” refers to the author, “Morus” to the interlocutor in the dialogue.) In the body of this essay I will discuss Peter Giles only in passing, since he is not one of the chief spokesmen and among the interlocutors Giles gets by far the fewest lines. Even so, two details about Giles stand out. First, from the 1516 edition of *Utopia* onward, the text is prefaced with a letter from More to Giles, in which More presents the “little book” to Giles, apologizes for delay in sending it, and speaks with playful irony about its contents and purpose. A second notable detail is the extravagant praise Morus heaps upon Giles in setting the context for the conversation. Among the characteristics noted by Morus, we find that Giles is “cultured, virtuous, and courteous to all”; with friends Giles is “open-hearted, affectionate, loyal and sincere.” Furthermore, “No one is more modest or more frank; no one better combines simplicity with wisdom.” And last, but not least, his conversation is “pleasant” and “witty without malice.” Placing these details alongside one another, Peter Giles is presented as a well-disposed, first-hand hearer of the conversation and also the first reader of More's written record of it. In terms of dialogical placement, then, Giles is very much like later readers of *Utopia*. Arguably, his presence as an attentive hearer/reader gives some notion of More's preferred audience.

obligations; he is committed to others on many levels—political², religious³, filial⁴—and he performs the duties associated with these commitments. Hythlodæus, on the other hand, is a man without such mundane ties and their attendant obligations. Unencumbered, Hythlodæus is able to live a life of Odyssean adventure, exploring strange new worlds inhabited by people with extraordinary customs.⁵ As Morus and Hythlodæus discuss the central question of Book 1, namely whether a philosopher such as Hythlodæus should serve as counselor to a king, these two ways of life are manifest in the words and deeds of each interlocutor.

The very idea of serving a king makes Hythlodæus bristle. When Giles makes the suggestion of service, Hythlodæus rhetorically responds, “Would a way of life so absolutely repellent to my spirit make my life happier? As it is now, *I live as I please*” (13).⁶ In response, Morus appeals to Hythlodæus' “noble and truly philosophical nature” (13). With his learning and experience, says Morus, Hythlodæus could provoke a prince to just and noble actions. In reply to Morus, Hythlodæus bluntly argues, “You are quite mistaken, my dear More, first in me and then in the situation itself” (14). Both here and throughout the dialogue, Hythlodæus exhibits a lack of restraint in speech that parallels his unfettered way of life. Morus, conversely, chooses his words carefully and employs them sparingly. For Morus, simply speaking the truth is not enough; it must be spoken in a way that suits the occasion, and what is suitable for an occasion is a function of the various commitments that come into play.

In order to see what I have in mind, let's consider the examples presented by Hythlodæus in support of his argument against serving as counselor to a king. When developing his case that “the public would still not be better off if [he] exchanged [his] contemplative leisure for active endeavour” (14), Hythlodæus claims that neither princes themselves nor their other advisors would hear his wise counsel. For first, the princes “apply themselves to the arts of war...instead of to the good arts of peace”; they are “more set on acquiring new kingdoms by hook or crook than on governing well those they already have” (14). And as for the other advisors, they “are so wise already that they don't need to accept or approve advice from anyone else—or at least they have that opinion of themselves”; they “endorse and flatter the most absurd statements of the prince's special favourites”; and they “envy everyone else and admire only themselves” (14). Hythlodæus' first example of such “proud, obstinate, ridiculous judgements” is an experience he had while in England.⁷

² In providing a context for their conversation, Morus explains that he had gone to Antwerp on *business* (9). Prior to coming to Antwerp, he had been sent to Flanders as the King's spokesman (8).

³ He has just heard Mass at Notre Dame, and as he walks out he happens to see Giles and Hythlodæus talking together (9).

⁴ By the time of the conversation, Morus had been separated from his home, wife, and children more than four months (9).

⁵ Giles says Morus must meet Hythlodæus, “for there is no mortal alive today can tell you so much about unknown peoples and unexplored lands” (9).

⁶ Emphasis has been added. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of *Utopia* throughout this essay are to the Cambridge University Press revised edition (2002).

⁷ Note Morus' immediate interest in the example: “What! Were you ever in my country?” (14). Unlike Hythlodæus, who revels in his detachment from all commitments, Morus shows an intense

Hythlodæus' encounter with the lawyer while dining with John Morton is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, there is the profound similarity between the Morus of the dialogue and Morton as a character within Hythlodæus' tale. Morton, like Morus, is a man of many obligations. At the time of the conversation, Morton is not only Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal, but also Lord Chancellor of England. Indeed, Hythlodæus claims, "At the time when I was in England, the King depended greatly on his advice, and he seemed the mainspring of all public affairs" (15). Significantly, Morton "had been whirled about by violent changes of fortune so that in the midst of great dangers he had learned practical wisdom, which is not soon lost when so purchased" (15). In Morton, then, we have an example of a man who, like Morus himself, has entered into the service of a king. Furthermore, in the process Morton has learned prudence "in the midst of great dangers." At first glance, it would seem that Morton himself serves as a powerful *counterexample* to Hythlodæus' argument of the futility of service. We should also remind ourselves that, as far as Hythlodæus' examples go, Morton is the closest we get to an actual, historical example of service. From this point onward, we move ever deeper into the recesses of Hythlodæus' political imagination.

But we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. In defense of Hythlodæus, he brings up the example not to draw our attention to Morton, but to share the incident that happened while dining with Morton and the lawyer. When the lawyer saw fit to "praise the rigid execution of justice then being practiced on thieves," Hythlodæus—characteristically—"ventured to speak freely before the Cardinal" (15; emphasis added) against the death penalty for theft. In this example, Hythlodæus sticks very close to current political issues in England. Also, from this first example onward, the underlying problem according to Hythlodæus is the unjust distribution of wealth and the basic solution is an ever-mounting assault on freedom in general and private property in particular.⁸

In reply to Hythlodæus' modest proposal, the lawyer objects, "You have talked very well for a stranger, but you have heard more than you've been able to understand correctly, as I will make clear to you in a few words" (20-21). As the lawyer prepares to launch his textbook response,⁹ Cardinal Morton interposes, "Hold your tongue, for you won't be finished in a few words if this is the way you start. We will spare you the trouble of answering now and put off the whole task until our next meeting..." (21). Turning to Hythlodæus, Morton says, "Meanwhile, my dear Raphael, I'd be glad to hear why you think theft should not be punished with the extreme penalty, or what other punishment you think would be more conducive to the common good" (21). The contrast between the responses of the

lawyer and Morton is obvious: the lawyer, though he clearly has a grasp of the practical matters related to the question, does not have the prudence of civil speech measured to fit the occasion; Morton, intervening at the point when impassioned words could well derail the conversation, stops the lawyer and redirects the dialogue back to Hythlodæus in order to find out more of what he has in mind. The civil yet artful speech of the Cardinal calms the elevating emotion of the encounter and revives rational discourse.

In response to Cardinal Morton, Hythlodæus cites the example of the Polylerites, a name which means "People of Much Nonsense." The Polylerites pay tribute to the Persian king, but "they are hardly known by name to anyone but their immediate neighbours" (23). With the Polylerites, we begin the gradual, imaginary journey toward "No place" (the literal meaning of "Utopia"). There is still a shred of historical connection in his reference to the Persian king, but otherwise the existence of the Polylerites is dubious at best. Even so, some of their practices sound plausible—for example, the custom of paying restitution to the owner, not the prince.¹⁰ In praise of the Polylerites, Hythlodæus confidently boasts, "It is clear how mild and practical they are, for the aim of the punishment is to destroy vices and save men. The men are treated *so that they necessarily become good*" (24; emphasis added). When Hythlodæus' panegyric of the Polylerites is complete, the lawyer responds, briefly yet bluntly, "Such a system could never be established in England without putting the commonwealth in serious peril" (24). After shaking his head and making a wry face, the lawyer falls silent. All those listening—save Cardinal Morton—side with him.

At this point we've seen enough of Hythlodæus and the lawyer to realize that, although their views on political questions and their proper resolutions certainly diverge, there is an underlying similarity in terms of the way they engage in political discourse. Both have a tendency to be long-winded (although the lawyer apparently learns from Morton's rebuke) and neither tailors his speech to the situation at hand. To be sure, the lawyer's single sentence response is brief; but it again polarizes the discussion and prompts the rest of those present to take sides without hearing a suitable reply to Hythlodæus. That this is so is clear from the response of Cardinal Morton, who continues to try to draw Hythlodæus out of his own imagination and into the realm of political realities. "It is not easy," says Morton, "to guess whether this scheme would work well or not, since it has never been tried. But perhaps when the death sentence has been passed on a thief, the king might reprieve him for a time without right of sanctuary, and thus see how the plan worked" (25). The Cardinal adds that perhaps the same method could be used for dealing with vagabonds. Cynically, Hythlodæus concludes, "When the Cardinal had said this, they all vied with one another in praising enthusiastically ideas which they had received with contempt when I suggested them; and they particularly liked the idea about vagabonds because it was the Cardinal's addition" (25).

For Hythlodæus, of course, this incident clearly reveals the futility of service; for the reader, on the other hand, something else comes into view. In his second response to Hythlodæus, Morton finds a way to test Hythlodæus' ideas without deforming or discarding the existing system of justice. Put simply, Morton prudently brings Hythlodæus' political imagination into the real world. Thus, while

interest in his country. Recall that he left England on the king's business; and alongside his ardent desire to see his home, wife and children, Morus also desires to see his native country (9).

⁸ Hythlodæus proposes to rectify the situation by lifting the death penalty for thievery, but also banishing a whole list of things (including wine-bars, ale houses, brothels, and "crooked games" such as dice, cards, backgammon, etc.), making those who have ruined farmhouses or villages restore them or hand them over to others, restricting the rights of the rich to buy things, letting fewer people be brought up in idleness, restoring agriculture and reviving wool-manufacture, etc.

⁹ "First, I will summarize what you said; then I will show how you have been misled by ignorance of our ways; finally, I will refute all your arguments and demolish them. And so to begin with the first thing I promised, on four points you seemed to me—" (21).

¹⁰ See page 23.

Hythlodæus brings up the incident so that Giles and Morus might *see* the futility of service,¹¹ Morton draws our gaze in another direction—namely, to *see* how Hythlodæus' proposed reforms might function in the real world.¹² It is important to note here that Morton is not dismissive of Hythlodæus' radical ideas. Rather, he gives him his say and reflects upon how they might be tested without overturning the political and legal order already established in England.

Once Hythlodæus has finished relating (in extended monologue) his first example and its "silly" addendum, we return to a dialogue between Morus and Hythlodæus. Morus, like Morton in the first example, is more than willing to hear Hythlodæus out—even though he still disagrees about the question of serving kings. Indeed, Morus says Hythlodæus has given him "great pleasure" and praises him for his wisdom and wit (27). "Still," continues Morus, "I by no means give up my former opinion: indeed, I am fully persuaded that if you could overcome your aversion to court life, your advice to a prince would be of the greatest advantage to the public welfare. No part of a good man's duty—and that means yours—is more important than this" (27–28). Appealing to the philosophical authority of Plato, Morus encourages Hythlodæus to consider the notion of the philosopher-king found in the *Republic*. Again we see the care and discretion of Morus' words. Note well also the appeal to duty here. Morus is once again commending his way of life to Hythlodæus.

By contrast, Hythlodæus responds with unrestrained speech. After a few ill-chosen remarks about Plato's notion of the philosopher-king, Hythlodæus presents another example against service. There are notable similarities and differences between these first and second examples. As for similarities, both have Hythlodæus situated within a courtly setting to give advice. Each example also addresses real political problems. Yet in both cases, Hythlodæus appeals to the precedent of peoples whose very existence is doubtful. And of course, in both cases his counsel is supposed to fail. But there are also notable differences. For instance, while the first example was drawn from a "true" conversation Hythlodæus had in a "true" courtly setting, the second example not only *ends* but also *begins* in his imagination. (We should note, however, that at least the imaginary king is that of an actual European country.) Furthermore, although the Achorians are like the Polylerites in their questionable existence, the former are one step further away from any connection with historical regimes, since the point of reference here is not Persia but Utopia. Thus, with his second example, we proceed a bit deeper into Hythlodæus' imagination.

¹¹ After relating a "silly" incident that followed the conversation between Morton, the lawyer, and himself, Hythlodæus comments, "Look, my dear More, what a long story I have inflicted on you. I would be quite ashamed if you had not yourself eagerly insisted on it, and seemed to listen as if you did not want any part to be left out. Though I ought to have related this conversation more concisely, I did feel bound to recount it, so you might see how those who rejected what I said approved of it immediately afterwards, when they saw the Cardinal did not disapprove.... From this episode you can see how little courtiers would value me or my advice" (27; emphasis added).

¹² Though it goes beyond the scope of Book I, I must point out how this emphasis upon seeing political proposals tested is characteristic of Morus as well. In the last sentence of Book II, Morus says, "I freely confess that in the Utopian commonwealth there are very many features that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see" (107).

After a mere four-word reply from Morus, Hythlodæus launches into his third example against service. The similarities among his examples remain the same here, yet in this one we move completely into the realm of Hythlodæus' political imagination. He is in the imaginary court of an unnamed king in an unknown country. He again cites the example of an unknown people (the Macarians, "blessed" or "happy" ones) to make his case, and again the only connection is to the imaginary world of Utopia. Furthermore, we should note that Hythlodæus' speech becomes more and more unrestrained as we move from one example to the next. In the second example, we find a whopping 464 word sentence. Here, in the third, we have a "simply gargantuan" one of 926 words.¹³ Moreover, his speech before king and court in the third example falls to new depths of tactlessness.¹⁴ When Hythlodæus has finally finished his tirade, he rhetorically asks, "Now, don't you suppose if I set these ideas and others like them before men strongly inclined to the contrary, they would turn deaf ears to me?" (34).

This brings us to the heart of the matter. In his longest reply to Hythlodæus, Morus makes a distinction between "academic" or "school" philosophy and "another philosophy, better suited for the role of a citizen, that takes its cue, adapts itself to the drama in hand and acts its part neatly and appropriately" (34-35). In essence, Morus counsels Hythlodæus toward prudence in political speech, as is evident in More's explanation, cited here at length:

That's how things go in the commonwealth, and in the councils of princes. If you cannot pluck up bad ideas by the root, or cure longstanding evils to your heart's content, you must not therefore abandon the commonwealth. Don't give up the ship in a storm because you cannot hold back the winds. You must not deliver strange and out-of-the-way speeches to people with whom they will carry no weight because they are firmly persuaded the other way. Instead, by an indirect approach, you must strive and struggle as best you can to handle everything tactfully—and thus what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make as little bad as possible. For it is impossible to make everything good unless all men are good, and that I don't expect to see for quite a few years yet (35).

Note well what Morus does not expect to see. He, like Morton, accommodates the style of his speech and the content of his counsel to political realities (in this case, the realities of human nature).

The impatience and imprudence of Hythlodæus' reply is quite telling: "The only result of this... will be that while I try to cure the madness of others, I'll be raving along with them myself. For if I wish to speak the truth, I will have to talk in the way I've described. Whether it's the business of a philosopher to tell lies, I don't know, but it certainly isn't mine" (35). At this point, the argument shifts away from the question of whether a philosopher should offer his wise counsel to a king and toward a defense of Hythlodæus' contention that private property should be abolished.¹⁵

¹³ 33n66.

¹⁴ On which, see 32-33.

¹⁵ "Thus I am wholly convinced that unless private property is entirely abolished, there can be no fair or just distribution of goods, nor can the business of mortals be conducted happily. As long as private

Morus simply cannot agree. Significantly, he responds, “But I don’t *see* it that way It seems to me that people cannot possibly live well where all things are in common” (38; emphasis added). To which, Hythlodæus replies, “I’m not surprised that you think of it this way, since *you have no image*, or only a false one, of such a commonwealth. *But you should have been with me in Utopia and seen with your own eyes* their manners and customs, as I did. . . . *If you had seen them*, you would frankly confess that *you had never seen* a well-governed people anywhere but there” (39; emphasis added).

The issue, then, as we approach the tale of Utopia in Book 2 is a conflict of visions. Throughout the dialogue, Hythlodæus tries to draw the other interlocutors deeper into his admittedly quite staggering political imagination. There is a notable progression to his tale telling; and as we prepare to hear the grand tale of Utopia, we are removed more and more from the historical moorings of existing political regimes. Hythlodæus insists that Giles and Morus would be convinced, if only they *saw* what he *had seen*. Morus, following the example of Morton, consistently draws our gaze in another direction. By means of prudent speech, he tactfully yet tirelessly redirects the conversation out of the realm of utopian dreams and back into the realm of political reality.

property remains, by far the largest and best part of the human race will be oppressed by a distressing and inescapable burden of poverty and anxieties. . . . [S]o long as private property remains, there is no hope at all of effecting a cure and restoring society to good health” (38).