

On the Development of Thomas More Studies

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I. Utopia

There's a huge amount of scholarship on *Utopia*. In Geritz's bibliography, *Utopia* occupies 97 pages—and *Richard* occupies 13 pages: all the other works together occupy 68 pages. Given this fact and the time constraint, I won't feel bad about confining myself almost exclusively to work in English and to things I've found especially valuable. I'll also spend far more of my time on *Utopia* than on *Richard*.

I'll begin with editions and translations, and then go to other items.

With *Utopia* as elsewhere, the Yale edition is the turning point. The second volume of Yale to appear (1965), it was edited by Edward Surtz, S.J., and J.H. Hexter, who had written the most important books about *Utopia* of the preceding decade. The strengths of the edition are Surtz's massive commentary, which is still the first place to look for information about the historical or intellectual context of any passage in *Utopia*, and Hexter's section—110 pages—of the introduction, which is the most brilliant and influential piece of criticism taking the radical political ideas of *Utopia* seriously.

Yet Yale has great weaknesses. The Latin text—a conservative reprint of the edition of March 1518—is very hard to use; the translation—Surtz's revision of a 1923 one by G.C. Richards—is often “awkward and unidiomatic” (*Utopia*, ed. Clarence H. Miller (2001), p. xxii). (It's now reprinted in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*.) Surtz's section of the introduction to Yale—57 pages on “*Utopia* as a Work of Literary Art”—is full of information but not sophisticated as literary criticism.

Once Yale appeared, the only editions prior to it that retained much importance were the first four (1516-18); J.H. Lupton's 1895 Clarendon Press one, and Marie Delcourt's Latin-French edition (text published 1936; translation 1950; both 1983). After Yale, there is André Prévost's 1978 Latin-French edition, with massive introduction and commentary (the Latin text is only a facsimile of the November 1518 edition); and the “Cambridge *Utopia*” (1995), by me, Robert Adams, and Clarence, with a lean introduction and commentary, a carefully revised version of Adams's translation, and the best, easiest-to-read version of the Latin text—

thoroughly repunctuated, with spelling brought into conformity with standard modern usage: for most purposes, it's sort of silly not to quote *Utopia* from *CU* now.

The most commonly used English translations are—as far as I can judge—as follows: (1) the first one—Ralph Robinson (1551, 1556)—still often used in modern English-only editions: generally quite accurate, but, as Clarence has written, “though lively and vivid, [it] often seems wordy and awkward” (op. cit., p. xxi). Not a good choice for students. (2) Paul Turner's in Penguin—much used, I'm sure, because it *is* Penguin—: I find it hateful, as it makes *Utopia* seem a smart-alecky book: “Hythloday,” for example, becomes, “Nonsense.” (3) The various versions of Adams: the ones in the Norton Critical Editions (1975, rev. 1992) are the liveliest but least accurate; the ones in Cambridge (1995, and the Logan-Adams teaching edition, rev. 2002), with numerous corrections suggested especially by Father Germain Marc'hadour and Clarence, are accurate and *still* pretty lively. I find it a delight to read. Still another corrected version of the Adams translation is appearing in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th edn. (2005). (5) Clarence's Yale translation (2001), which respects the fact that the Latin style of *Utopia* varies [sic] greatly. For teaching—or reading—you should use either the 2002 Cambridge edition or Clarence's 2001. Believe me.

The critical tradition on *Utopia* begins with the letters and poems by various humanists that Erasmus collected for the four early editions. These generally take it as a serious blueprint for reform. For the twists and turns of the critical tradition from these to the 20th century, see the quite interesting survey in the final chapter of Dominic Baker-Smith's *More's "Utopia"* (Unwin Critical Library, 1991). Modern criticism of *Utopia* may be thought to have begun with Frederick Seebohm's *The Oxford Reformers of 1498* (1867), which stressed that the primary affiliation of *Utopia* is with the tradition of Renaissance humanism, that the purpose of Book 2 lies in “the contrast presented by its ideal commonwealth to the conditions and habits of the European commonwealths of the period,” and that the book is a response to the *realpolitisch* political thought and action of the time. In his famous biography, R.W. Chambers developed further Seebohm's insights (though without any gratitude at all), and gave what has been the most influential answer to the question of why More made Utopia non-Christian: to shame Christian Europe by displaying a state founded on reason alone, without benefit of the Christian revelation, which in most respects acts far more like a Christian nation than the European nations do.

From Seebohm and Chambers grew what became the dominant 20th-century critical tradition, named “the humanistic interpretation” by Surtz in his two highly important books of 1957, *The Praise of Pleasure: Philosophy, Education, and Communism in More's Utopia* and *The Praise of Wisdom: A Commentary on the Religious and Moral Problems and Backgrounds of St. Thomas More's "Utopia."* These have a close kinship with his Yale commentary: wonderfully learned and valuable essays putting the ideas of *Utopia* into their intellectual contexts. Five years earlier (1952), Hexter had published his little book *More's "Utopia": The Biography of an Idea*: brilliant, but superseded by his section of the Yale introduction.

Though exponents of the humanistic interpretation vary greatly on the extent to which they take *Utopia* as a blueprint for reform, they all take it as serious social commentary, and the commonwealth of Utopia as a basically good place. There has, though, long been a scattering of interpreters who regard *Utopia* as a *jeu d'esprit*—

most famously, C.S. Lewis in his volume of the *Oxford History of English Literature* (1954). This view in some sense prefigured the emergence in the 1960s of what became a full-fledged counter-tradition to the humanistic interpretation. In this counter-tradition—developed, I believe, just about 100% by English professors—the focus is on the ironic and satiric dimensions of *Utopia*, especially as connected with its complex narrative technique. Sometimes the book is made to seem to be more or less about its major narrator, Hythloday. Whereas in all leftist (especially socialist) readings of the book Hythloday is the author's mouthpiece, in this new tradition he was likelier to be regarded as a primary object of More's satire.

The most salutary effect of this counter-tradition has been to make the best post-Yale critics of *Utopia* aware of the interpretive implications of the book's narrative technique: most recent exponents of the humanistic interpretation have attempted to avail themselves of, or at least in some way take into account, the points about narrative technique made in the counter-tradition. Modified in this way, the humanistic interpretation remains dominant—basically because it's correct: *Utopia* is [sic] a product of Renaissance humanism.

All I can do now is glance at a few of the most important—influential—post-Yale works. The most influential works of sophisticated literary criticism of *Utopia* in the past few decades have been, surely, Elizabeth McCutcheon's study of *litotes* in *Utopia* (1968; reprinted, with many other influential articles, in *Essential Articles for the study of Thomas More*, ed. Sylvester and Marc'hadour, 1977; see also her book on the letter to Giles: *My Dear Peter*, 1983), and Stephen Greenblatt's remarkable psycho-biographical study in *Renaissance Self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (1980). The great historian of political thought Quentin Skinner—whose *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) is invaluable for putting *Utopia* into the context of Renaissance political thought in general—reads *Utopia* as in some ways a humanist critique of humanist political thought; there's a more sophisticated version of this reading in his 1987 article "Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and the language of Renaissance Humanism" (in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden). My 1983 book *The Meaning of More's "Utopia"* also views *Utopia* as a humanist critique of humanism, though not always in the fashion of Skinner, who argues with me a good deal in his 1987 article. Baker-Smith's book (referred to earlier) is a highly sophisticated, agile synthesis of the two interpretive traditions.

I don't have time to mention any more individual works. For further guidance, see Baker-Smith's final chapter; the *ELR* "Recent Studies" series on More, including the latest, by Geritz (2005), surveying 1990-2003; and "Further Reading" in the 2002 Cambridge edition and in Clarence's Yale edition. I must say I think the long review article I wrote for *Moreana* in 1994 is very useful: it's called "Interpreting *Utopia*: Ten Recent Studies and the Modern Critical Traditions." Someone wanting to get a handle on the broad sweep of Utopian criticism could do worse than start there.

II. The History of King Richard the Third

For *The History of King Richard the Third*, again Yale has been crucial. Before it, there was J. Rawson Lumby's 1883 edition, which has a still-valuable commentary but actually bowdlerizes the text in a couple of places, and the edition in the unfinished *English Works of Sir Thomas More*, ed. W.E. Campbell and others (1931),

which has both a facsimile of the 1557 edition (edited by More's nephew William Rastell from a manuscript in More's hand) and a modern-spelling text, as well as extremely valuable introductory essays, commentary, and collations with other early editions. Sylvester's Yale edition was the first volume of Yale to be published (1963). Like the other Yale volumes, it preserves 16th-century spelling and punctuation. Sylvester added an excellent comprehensive introduction and a valuable commentary, which, like the commentary in the Yale *Utopia*, remains the first place to look for further information ("further," that is, to looking in my edition, which has a much more recent but also much slimmer commentary) on any aspect or passage of the English version. Sylvester's edition also includes the Latin version, but this part of it has been superseded by Volume 15 of the Yale edition (1986), ed. Daniel Kinney, with a text based on a newly discovered manuscript. My edition stands in the same relation to the English part of Sylvester's as *CU* does to the Yale *Utopia*: it has modernized spelling and punctuation—punctuation that, I think, makes the meaning of some sentences clear for the first time—and a lean introduction and commentary. I've wanted to make More's wonderful work as accessible as possible without "dumbing it down." There is a dumbed-down edition by Paul Murray Kendall—Richard's most-read modern biographer—which actually modernizes More's *language*, not just his spelling. Sylvester also did a modernized *spelling* edition for Yale (1976)—Clarence told me it was known around the Yale project as "Little Richard"—: an excellent edition, but I think superseded by mine. There's also a useful teaching edition available online through the Center. The 2005 Hesperus edition, edited anonymously but with a foreword by the well-known TV art commentator Sister Wendy Beckett, is slapdash: one of those books that, as the great Harvard (and Canadian) humanist Douglas Bush used to say, appears to have been written not just for but by the general reader.

To study More's *Richard* seriously, you need to know a good deal about the *other* historical writings on Richard, early and modern. The place to start is Charles Ross's standard biography, *Richard III* (1981). There's also Kendall's 1955 biography, certainly overly sympathetic to Richard, but great fun to read. Both also include valuable literature reviews. A.J. Pollard's *Richard III and the Princes in the Tower* (1991) is a wide-ranging account, wonderfully illustrated, of Richard's career and the vicissitudes of his reputation. Richard has, of course, always had his passionate defenders. Just as we have our *Moreana*, so they have their *The Ricardian*, a valuable clearinghouse for Richard scholarship.

The modern critical tradition on More's *Richard* may be regarded as having begun with the introductory essays in the 1931 *English Works*, with the treatment in Chambers's biography, and with A.F. Pollard's "The Making of Sir Thomas More's *Richard III*" (originally published 1933), which was influential in directing attention to *Richard* as literature, and especially to its affinities with drama. It is reprinted in *Essential Articles* (mentioned earlier), which also reprints, among other key articles, Arthur Noel Kincaid's "The Dramatic Structure of Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*" (originally published 1972), which has been influential in the development of a critical trend, dominant since the 1970s, that pushes the affinity between *Richard* and drama so far that More's work has often been treated as if it really were a play of one kind or another, rather than (as it clearly is) a member of a genre—rhetorical history—that has much in *common* with drama. For example, Alison Hanham, in her 1975 book *Richard III and His Early Historians*, claims that

Richard is a five-act drama satirizing “the whole craft of history.” Her book is very valuable in other ways. Greenblatt’s chapter in *Renaissance Self-fashioning* has a couple of superb pages on More’s *Richard* and Machiavelli. Finally, there’s a whole book on More’s *Richard* and humanist historiography, in German, by Hans Peter Heinrich.

For further guidance to the literature on and around *Richard*, see the six pages on “Further Reading” in my edition.