

JOHN C. OLIN



Erasmus' Adagia and More's Utopia

In memoriam Margaret Mann Phillips

MONTAIGNE REMARKED IN HIS ESSAY "On Repentance" that if he had met Erasmus he would have expected him to speak in proverbs. He was thinking most probably of the collection Erasmus had gathered from the ancient classics and had published in numerous editions, the *Adagia* or more descriptively the *Adagiorum chiliades*, "thousands of adages," containing not only the proverbs themselves, but also essays, long and short, explaining the proverbs, recounting their literary sources, and enunciating themes dear to the heart of Erasmus.¹ Indeed it can be called at least in part a book of essays, and although they are of a different character and tone than Montaigne's, there is some kinship perhaps in the genre.

I am going to translate here one of the shorter adage-essays and comment on it. My purpose is to call attention to a significant theme in the reform humanism Erasmus represented. I am struck by the affinity between this theme and that great masterpiece of the Renaissance, Thomas More's *Utopia*, and I want particularly to discuss the character and significance of their relationship.

The *Adagia* saw many editions and revisions during Erasmus' lifetime. First published in Paris in 1500 at the outset of his career it was greatly expanded in 1508 and published in Venice by the famous printer Aldus Manutius with whom Erasmus was working at that time. The next important edition, further revised and enlarged, appeared in 1515, issuing from the press of Johann Froben in Basel where Erasmus had

recently gone and where he was henceforth regularly to publish. This revised *Adagia* has been called the "Utopian" edition because of the affinity of several themes prominent in it with Thomas More's *Utopia* which was first published in 1516.² There were several subsequent Froben editions of the *Adagia* while Erasmus lived and many reprints both during and after his lifetime. The volume grew to be a formidable collection of 4151 adages, a vast treasure house of classical erudition and a compendium of Erasmian comments, opinions, and critiques.

The adage-essay that I have selected for translation and discussion here is the first one in the collection, the proverb *Amicorum communia omnia*, "Friends have all things in common." In essay form it dates from the 1508 Aldine edition, and there are significant additions to it in the 1515 and 1526 Froben editions. It had appeared in embryo in the Paris edition of 1500, but it became proverb number one only in the expanded edition of 1508, a place of honor and importance it retained thereafter. Let me now present the English translation of the complete text.³



Friends Have All Things in Common

Τὰ τῶν φίλων κοινὰ, that is, Friends have all things in common. Since there is no proverb more wholesome or more famous I have chosen it as a good omen to begin this book of adages. And indeed if it were as fixed in the hearts of men as it is ever on their lips, certainly most of the evils of our life would be averted. Socrates inferred from this proverb that all things belong to good men just as they do to the gods. For all things belong to the gods, he said. Good men are the friends of the gods, and friends have all things in common. Therefore good men possess all things.

The proverb is quoted in Euripides' *Orestes*, *Phoenissae*, and *Andromache*, and in Terence's *Adelphoe*. It is said that it was also in Menander's play of the same name. Cicero quotes it in the first book of *De officiis*, and Aristotle cites it in Book VIII of the *Ethics* and Plato in Book V of the *Laws*. In the latter passage Plato attempts to show that the best state of the commonwealth consists in the sharing of all things. "The first society then," he declares, "the one with the best constitution and laws, is where the old saying will be observed as far as

possible throughout the whole society. I mean the saying that friends have all their possessions in common." He also says that a society will be happy and blessed where the words 'mine' and 'not mine' are never heard. But it is amazing how displeasing, yes, how hateful that community of Plato's is to Christians, although nothing ever said by a pagan philosopher is more in keeping with the mind of Christ.⁴

Aristotle in Book II of the *Politics* modifies the view of Plato, saying that ownership and property belong to specific individuals but otherwise for the sake of use, virtue, and civil fellowship everything is common according to the proverb.⁵ Martial in Book II of the *Epigrams* jests about someone called Candidus who always had this adage on his lips although he shared nothing with his friends:

Candidus, O Candidus, pompously you echo this adage
Night and day, "Friends have all in common."

And he concludes his epigram:

You give naught away, yet you say, O Candidus,
"Friends share all."

Theophrastus in Plutarch's essay 'On Brotherly Love' elegantly remarks: "If the goods of friends are held in common, it is very fitting that the friends of friends also be shared in common."

Cicero in the first book of the *Laws* seems to attribute this adage to Pythagoras when he says: "For whence comes that Pythagorean dictum, the goods of friends are held in common and friendship is equality." Moreover Diogenes Laertius has Timaeus relate that this saying had its origin with Pythagoras. Aulus Gellius in his *Attic Nights*, Book I, chapter 9, claims that Pythagoras not only was the author of this proverb but also introduced a community of life and resources, even such as Christ wishes all Christians to practice. For whoever Pythagoras had admitted into that band of his disciples gave whatever money and property they possessed to the common fund. This practice is called in Latin *coenobium*, a word undoubtedly derived from the fellowship of life and possessions.⁶



The development of this adage-essay is remarkable. In 1500 Erasmus had limited himself to a few lines. He simply stated that the proverb was quoted by a character in one of Terence's plays and was cited also in Plato "under the name of Euripides." In 1508 a major expansion

of its classical sources took place, and drawing on Cicero and Diogenes Laertius Erasmus attributes its origin to Pythagoras. In 1515 came further revision. Several new sentences were added which radically changed the character of the essay. The adage now took on greater thrust as a reform concept, and by the same token its affinity with the teachings of Christ was affirmed. The correspondence of its presentation in such incisive form in this edition with More's description (and Hythloday's defence) of Utopian society is also striking. More's book in fact, we might say, is a dramatic commentary on this adage. And the emphatic references to what Christ thought and desired not only heighten the proverb's role as a principle of moral and social reform but demonstrate that harmony between the classical heritage and Christianity which Erasmus and other humanists perceived. Finally in 1526 Erasmus somewhat qualified the full Platonic ideal of community by adding a restraining note from Aristotle. He retreated slightly, it would seem, though his citation from the *Politics* hardly does justice to the fundamental critique which the great Peripatetic launched against his former teacher's communalism.

The theme of this adage-essay and its correspondence with More's *Utopia*, as I have indicated, especially intrigue me. Both Erasmus and More present and develop the same basic idea: the best social order is one in which all possessions are held in common and a close community of living and sharing prevails. Both men appear most certainly to be advocating communism, albeit without the Marxist dialectic or any modern political overtone. They are aware that their prescription has its roots in classical as well as Christian antiquity—a factor, it would seem, that makes it an integral part of their humanist inheritance. The question I should now like to pose is how should we understand this espousal of so radical a moral and social concept, how literally should we take it as a reform proposal.

The question is often asked of More's *Utopia*, but it is one not easily or definitely answered in view of the character of that work—its fictive as well as its dialogue form, its occasional irony, the ambiguity of its proper names. Is Utopia really Noplace? Is Hythloday simply spinning a yarn? If not, what lesson are we to draw from this "best state of a commonwealth"? That question perhaps can be better approached through Erasmus' *Adagia*. If the same theme is struck in both works, the more direct and straightforward expression of it should be the simpler to analyze, the clearer to grasp.

In the introduction to the *Adagia* which first appeared in the Aldine edition of 1508 Erasmus discusses the nature and use of proverbs,

and to show how a very short adage can contain deep philosophical and religious truths he cites the dictum "Friends have all things in common." His extended comment proving this point runs as follows:⁷

If anyone more diligently and deeply analyzes that saying of Pythagoras "Friends have all things in common," he will certainly find the sum and substance of human happiness expressed in this brief remark. What else is Plato driving at in so many volumes save to promote community and its foundation, friendship? If he could convince mortals of these things, war, envy, fraud would immediately depart from our midst; in short a whole army of evils would march out of our lives once and for all. What other aim had Christ the prince of our religion? Truly He gave to the world only one precept, the rule of charity, and He stressed that everything in the Law and the Prophets hangs on that alone. Or, what else does charity urge save that all have all things in common? Namely, it urges that joined in friendship with Christ and bound to Him by the same force that unites Him with the Father and imitating as far as we can that perfect communion by which He and the Father are one we also become one with Him and, as Paul says, are made one spirit and one flesh in God, so that by right of friendship all that is His is shared with us and all that is ours is shared with Him. Then it urges that joined with one another in equal bonds of friendship as members of the same Head, as one and the same body, we come alive with the same spirit and weep and rejoice at the same things. That mystical bread gathered from many grains into one flour also reminds us of this, as does the draught of wine fused into one liquid from the clusters of many grapes. Finally charity urges that since the sum total of all created things is in God and God in turn is in all things the whole universe, as it were, be restored to unity. You see what an ocean of philosophy or rather theology has been opened up for us by so small a proverb.

What strikes us most about this explanation of Erasmus is how he relates the proverb to Scripture and to basic Christian doctrine. In the adage-essay of 1515 he had indicated that the Platonic-Pythagorean dictum was in harmony with the teaching of Christ, but here seven years earlier he had spelled out that agreement in considerable detail. (These introductory remarks of course prefaced the adage-essay in 1508.) Plato's *communitas* is equated with Christ's *charitas*, and the peace and well-being of society is made to coincide with membership in the mys-

tical body of Christ and with universal reconciliation, both of which St. Paul so often speaks.⁸ The proverb is given a fundamentally religious meaning, or at least its social thrust is confirmed and reinforced by religion and rooted in a profound theology of unity.⁹ It is an impressive statement. It is clear proof, I think, of Erasmus' religious seriousness and depth, and it corroborates an observation of John O'Malley that the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ "must be taken as one of the fundamental strands in the fabric of his thought."¹⁰

What does this explanation tell us about this axiomatic prescription as a social reform, about Utopian communism as an example to imitate? I think we begin to realize that what both Erasmus and More are presenting is an ultimate moral and religious ideal—a way of life millennial, or practically so, in its fulfillment of the demands of Christian charity and its achievement of that unity for which Christ prayed. The pagans with the light of reason may have glimpsed the possibility and may even have elaborated their vision, but its actual attainment will be the product of Christian virtue and brotherhood as it is the object of Christian hope. This seems to be the message Erasmus conveys in his introductory remarks. More in *Utopia* is not so explicit, but his work lends itself to this understanding.

A true expert on *Utopia*, Edward Surtz, interprets More's attitude in this way.¹¹ In his view Utopia is an ideal that exists only in More's mind and heart, and its realization must depend on the moral rectitude of those who would create and maintain such a commonwealth. More's "ideal will always remain that of a common Christian life for a whole Christian nation, but the realization of this ideal depends upon the character of its citizens, who must be as perfect in their Christianity—or as eager in their pursuit of Christian perfection—as the Utopians are in their rationality."¹² That's a tall order indeed. Such perfection on a broad scale, whether Christian or rational, is out of reach, for the nature itself of man and the conditions of his earthbound existence stand in the way. The Utopian ideal then is a millennial dream; the concrete circumstances and practical problems of man in society require other arrangements.

Does this interpretation render *Utopia* as well as Erasmus' adage-essay a futile, not to say meaningless, exercise? I think not, but before I answer that question I want to say a few more words about More's famous book. I would like to take note of three passages in *Utopia* that are particularly relevant, I believe, to what we have been discussing.

In Book II of *Utopia* in the description of Utopian religions we are told that when the citizens of that mythical commonwealth heard about

Christ and His teaching many were disposed to become Christian.¹³ Hythloday, More's narrator, speculates that it may have been "because they thought it [Christianity] nearest to that belief which has the widest prevalence among them." And he adds: "But I think that this factor, too, was of no small weight, that they had heard that His disciples' common way of life had been pleasing to Christ and that it is still in use among the truest societies of Christians."¹⁴ This comment echoes especially the concluding remarks which Erasmus added to his adage-essay in 1515. The whole passage of course asserts the affinity between pagan, that is, rational, and Christian ideals in so far as the Utopian scheme of things is concerned.

A similar point is made in a passage near the end of *Utopia*, though an extremely interesting qualification is appended that underlines the difficulty in making good the ideal. Hythloday summing up the communal order that prevails in Utopia declares:

Nor does it occur to me to doubt that a man's regard for his own interests or the authority of Christ our Saviour—who in His wisdom could not fail to know what was best and who in His goodness could not fail to counsel what He knew to be best—would long ago have brought the whole world to adopt the laws of the Utopian commonwealth, had not one single monster, the chief and progenitor of all plagues, striven against it—I mean, Pride.¹⁵

The linkage of Utopia with a Christian paradigm is asserted, but the great stumbling block is seen as man himself—his imperfection, his sinfulness. "This serpent from hell," Hythloday continues, "entwines itself around the hearts of men and acts like the suckfish in preventing and hindering them from entering on a better way of life."¹⁶

This realism finds even more pointed expression in a memorable and oft-quoted passage in Book I. In the dialogue that is the central theme of that Book about serving as a councilor to a prince More counters Hythloday's high-minded disdain for such a post with these remarks:

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. On the other hand, you must not force upon people new and strange ideas which you

realize will carry no weight with persons of opposite conviction. 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. For 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.¹⁷

Hythloday objects and makes his reply, but More's hardheaded and pragmatic approach to political reality in this instance is certainly striking and has the ring of simple truth. "The author of *Utopia* was no Utopian," observes Professor Hexter in discussing this remarkable passage.¹⁸ It is the last sentence however to which I would like to call attention: "It is impossible that all should be well unless all men were good . . ." Since they are not and their vices like the suckfish hold them back the Utopian dream per se is unrealizable. What then is its purpose? Why do More and Erasmus both advance this lofty ideal?

I have already stressed that the ideal they have in mind is a spiritual one. It has to do with men being good, it has to do with Christ's command to love one another, it has to do with the values men live by, it has to do with changing and reforming lives. Obviously the social dimension is paramount. The health of society depends on how men behave. Greedy landlords, ambitious princes, fawning courtiers cause suffering and disorder. It is they who bear the brunt of the criticism in the first Book of *Utopia*, and it is their absence in the commonwealth described in the second Book that makes that happy land Utopia. There the vices so prevalent in the Europe of More's time have been eradicated. Utopian laws and institutions supposedly have eliminated them, but it is actually the moral philosophy of the Utopians and their many virtues that have triumphed. Good people have built a good society. More's message, I think, is contained therein. Erasmus wrote that More "published *Utopia* to show what the cause of our civil problems are, having England which he knows and understands so well particularly in mind."¹⁹ The conciseness and precision of that statement are admirable. If we read it in the context of what both men have written it means that the causes lie within man himself and that a better world awaits man's moral reformation. It means that the redress of the social and political ills besetting Christian Europe in those critical times will only proceed from a change of heart in its peoples. More has dramatized that theme in *Utopia*, Erasmus has expounded it with

special emphasis in the *Adagia*. Together they have raised a beacon on the margin of a stormy sea.

Fordham University



Notes

1. Margaret Mann Phillips, *The 'Adages' of Erasmus, a Study with Translations* (Cambridge, 1964). See also Thomas M. Greene, "Erasmus's 'Festina lente': Vulnerabilities of the Humanist Text" in *Mimesis, From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes*, eds. John D. Lyons and Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (Hanover and London, 1982), pp. 132-48. The first 500 adages have so far been translated and published in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, Vol. 31: *Adages lii to lv100*, trans. Margaret Mann Phillips, annotated by R. A. B. Mynors (Toronto, 1982). The complete *Adagia* is in the Leiden *Opera Omnia* of Erasmus (1703-06), volume II. A new critical edition will appear in the Amsterdam *Opera Omnia*, now in progress. Vol. II, nos. 5 and 6, of this series, containing the third thousand of the adages, *Adagiorum chiliades tertia*, was published in 1981.

2. Phillips, *The 'Adages' of Erasmus*, pp. 106 ff. More began writing *Utopia* at Antwerp in the summer of 1515 and finished the book in London the following year. Erasmus arranged for its publication by Dirk Martens at Louvain later that year. See J. H. Hexter, *More's Utopia* (Princeton, 1952), pp. 15 ff.

3. I have used the text in the *Adagiorum chiliades* published by the heirs of Sebastian Gryphius at Lyons in 1559. Additions to the text as it was expanded and revised by Erasmus in earlier editions are in italics and are footnoted. I have not always repeated in my translation the proverb as quoted by Erasmus from the ancient author he cites.

4. The above two sentences in italics were added in the 1515 Froben edition. The second citation is from the *Republic*, Book V (462c).

5. This sentence in italics was added in the 1526 Froben edition. Book II of Aristotle's *Politics* contains an extensive critique of Plato's community ideal. Chapter 5 of Book II is especially relevant here.

6. The above three sentences in italics were added in the 1515 Froben edition. The term *coenobium* which Erasmus also gives in its Greek form *κοινωβιον* literally means "common life."

7. I have made the translation from the 1559 Lyons edition, col. 11. The text is the same as the original 1508 text.

8. Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 1:9-10, Colossians 1:20.

9. See John 17:20–23.

10. In "Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity as Key to Their Conflict," *Sixteenth Century Journal* V, 2 (October 1974):55.

11. In *The Praise of Pleasure* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), Chap. XV: "Thomas More and Communism: the Solution."

12. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

13. St. Thomas More, *Utopia* in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 4, eds. Edward Surtz, S.J., and J. H. Hexter (New Haven, 1964), 217–19. Hereafter cited as CW 4.

14. The reference is to Acts 2:42–45 and 4:32–37, the *locus classicus* for the existence of a community of goods, a *κοινωνία*, among early Christians, and also to religious orders who practiced a community life.

15. CW 4, 243.

16. CW 4, 243–45.

17. CW 4, 99–101. German Arciniegas hits the bull's-eye when he states in his *America in Europe* (New York, 1986), p. 54, that "Utopia presupposes a government in the hands of good men." Chapter 3 of this work presents an excellent discussion of More's classic in its historical context.

18. *More's Utopia*, p. 131.

19. My translation of Erasmus' reference to *Utopia* in the sketch of Thomas More he wrote in a letter to Ulrich von Hutten July 23, 1519, in *Erasmi epistolae*, eds. P. S. Allen and H. M. Allen, vol. 4 (Oxford, 1922), 21 (Ep. 999, 11.256–59).