

Moreana, no. 31-32 (Nov 1971): 47-50

UTOPIA
AND THE PROPER PLACE OF GOLD :
CLASSICAL SOURCES AND RENAISSANCE ANALOGUES

In a previous issue of *Moreana* Ward Allen inquired whether More, in describing the Utopians' manner of using gold, may want us "to understand that the Utopians fall into the hands of their rulers by rejecting the discipline of God's limited supply of gold."¹ In reply, the editor aptly quoted from More's preface to his *Treatise on the Passion*: "How proud be men of gold and silver, no part of ourself, but of the earth, and of nature no better than is the poor copper or tin, nor to man's use so profitable as is the poor metal that maketh us the ploughshare and horseshoon and horsenails!" A negative answer to the query could be fashioned on somewhat different grounds as well.

In the tradition of humanism which More and his friends fostered, gold was condemned not only for its lack of utility but also for its intrinsic perniciousness. Hythloday's words recall an important tenet from classical antiquity, echoed repeatedly in the English Renaissance. He explains that Nature

uelut parens indulgentissima optima quaeque in propatulo posuerit,
ut aerem, aquam, ac tellurem ipsam, longissime uero uana ac nihil
profutura semouerit.²

(like a most kind and indulgent mother, has exposed to view all that is best, like air and water and earth itself, but has removed as far as possible from us all vain and unprofitable things).

Gold for the ancients and for the humanists was a paradox. Its name designated the world's first and most perfect age; yet it was the root of all evil.³ Obviously, More in *Utopia* was focusing on the latter side of this paradox. In this respect he stood squarely in a tradition extending from Ovid through Milton.⁴ Ovid had described how after the Golden Age men

1. *Moreana*, XVIII (March, 1968), 5-6.

2. *Yale Works*, IV, 150-151.

3. This paradox is mentioned by Harry Levin in his recent book, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1970), p. 23ff. The paradox as it pertains to individual works deserves more study.

4. As far as I know, the following parallels to the passage of *Utopia* have not heretofore been noted.

itum est in viscera terrae
 quasque recondiderat Stygiisque admoverat umbris
 effodiuntur opes, inritamenta malorum
 iamque nocens ferrum ferroque nocentius aurum
 prodierat.

(*Metamorphoses*, 1, 138-142) ¹

(delved as well into the very bowels of the earth ; and the wealth which the creator had hidden away and buried deep amidst the very Stygian shades, was brought to light, wealth that pricks men on to crime. And now baneful iron had come, and gold more baneful than iron).

Horace touched upon the same idea, when he depicted Juno praying that Rome, the new Troy, might be

aurum inreperitum et sic melius situm,
 cum terra celat, spernere fortior
 quam cogere humanos in usus
 omne sacrum rapiente dextra.

(*Odes*, 3, 3, 49-52)

(stronger to spurn undiscovered gold – better so bestowed, while Earth yet hides it – than to gather it for human uses with a hand that plunders every sacred things).

In comparable terms Boethius lamented the passing of the former age :²

Heu primus quis fuit ille
 Auri qui pondera tecti
 Gemmasque latere uolentes
 Pretiosa pericula fodit ?

(*De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ii, Metrum 5, 27-30)

(Ah, who was he that first did show
 The heaps of treasure [literally, gold] which the earth did hide,
 And jewels which lay close below,
 By which he costly dangers did provide ?)

Writers after More developed the same idea. Retaining More's emphasis on nature as a mother, these departed from his delicacy as they elaborated on Ovid's *viscera terrae* to suggest the incestuous depravity of man's greed. Thus Spenser's Sir Guyon, addressing Mammon, describes the end of the Golden Age :

1. The quotations and translations from Ovid, Horace, and Boethius come from the Loeb Classical Library editions.
2. Boethius appears to owe something to this from Seneca : "A tergo lucem relinquere quae tanta spes fuit ? quae tanta necessitas hominem ad sidera erectum incurauit et defodit et in fundum telluris intimae mersit, ut emeret aurum non minore periculo quaerendum quam possidendum ?" (*Quaestiones Naturales*, 5, 15, 3 ; ed. Paul Oltramare, 2 vols, Paris, 1929).

Then gan a cursed hand the quiet wombe
 Of his great grandmother with steele to wound,
 And the hid treasures in her sacred tombe
 With sacriledge to dig.

(*The Faerie Queene*, 2, 7, 17) ¹

Similarly, Phineas Fletcher exclaims,

Oh hungrie metall, false deceitfull ray,
 Well laid'st thou dark, prest in th' earths hidden wombe ;
 Yet through our mothers entrails cutting way,
 We dragge thy buried coarse from hellish tombe.

(*The Purple Island*, VIII, 27) ²

Milton, describing his devil Mammon, presents the idea most vividly and most horribly of all :

by him first
 Men also, and by his suggestion taught,
 Ransack'd the Center, and with impious hands
 Rifl'd the bowels of their mother Earth
 For Treasures better hid.

(*Paradise Lost*, I, 684-688) ³

The import of all these passages is that God or Nature has taken pains to protect men from gold by concealing it far out of their reach. Only through man's impiety is gold known and valued at all. Since, however, the presence of gold is a fact of postlapsarian existence, and the Golden Age is long past, our business must be to resist the lure of that "precious peril". Far from rejecting God's plan, the Utopians are unique in restoring one vestige of that plan.

1. *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. R.E.N. Dodge (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1908).
2. *Poetical Works*, ed. Frederick Boas (Cambridge, England, 1909).
3. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Hughes (New York, 1957).

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R. W. Zandvoort, *English Studies*, 47, 1966.

"ALTOGETHER, THIS VOLUME IS A REMARKABLE TRIBUTE TO THE AUTHOR OF UTOPIA".

T. P. Dunning, *Philosophical Studies*, 1966.

"A superb edition of *Utopia* ... The emended translation is good, plain English, pleasant to read, a perfectly straightforward rendering".

Clarence Miller, *English Language Notes*, June 1966.

"This authoritative and meticulous edition of More's Latin masterpiece is constructed with a grandeur and a copiousness that would have delighted Erasmus and the other early admirers of *Utopia*."

To oversimplify, one might say that if Hythloday and the character More gives himself in *Utopia* could step out of the work to evaluate and appraise it, they might present us with something like the essays of Professor Hexter and Father Surtz. Like the character More, Father Surtz speaks with brevity, caution, and cogency."

Paul W. Blackford, *Neo-Latin News*, published jointly with *Seventeenth-Century News*, Summer 1966.

"What has been produced here is a volume of infinite interest and usefulness to which many generations of More's friends are bound to be indebted. It is perhaps reasonable to think that it could not have been otherwise. The editors are experienced students of More whose previous writing on him make them the only logical choices for the task, and they have had not only the stimulation of More and his work but also that provided by the Yale project along with the help of its executive editor, which they acknowledge 'over his protests' ".

R. K. Browne, *The Month*, June 1966.

"Because of [St. Thomas More's] sanctity and because of his greatness, we can never be sufficiently grateful for this magnificent Yale edition of his works ... *Richard III* showed that the task was being performed with skill and care, with taste, scholarship and love. *Utopia* shows that the standards are not merely being maintained, they are being raised".

Margaret Hastings, *American Historical Review*, Oct. 1966

"The two editors would probably argue that their differences in interpretation illustrate the complexity of the man, More, of the problems about human nature and human society with which he deals in *Utopia*, and of the web of history in his times. They do not disagree in their admiration for More's genius and creativity, and their collaboration on text and introduction is valuable for the reader".

