

☛ The Tone of More's Farewell to *Utopia*: A Reply to J. H. Hexter

By Ward S. Allen

[EDITOR'S NOTE: From its very beginning humanism has risen on the scaffolding of controversy; for humane learning seeks to repair the ruins of our first parents, and the blueprint and schedule for that re-edification are unlikely to be adopted unanimously. The great humanists of each age have been also great controversialists: More, Milton, Samuel Johnston, John Henry Newman, C. S. Lewis, Noam Chomsky—to name a few scattered examples. Perhaps with less grandeur (I started to say magnificentia or maiestas) though with no less spirit, present-day friends of Thomas More erect their own rival constructions of More's works—especially of the most famous and controversial, the *Utopia*.

The lineage of the following article may be sketched thus: In *Moreana*, No. 18 (1968), Ward Allen presented a brief note questioning whether More, in depicting the Utopians' attitude toward gold, might wish us "to understand that the Utopians fall into the hands of their rulers by rejecting the discipline of God's limited supply of gold." Germain Marc'hadour, in the same issue, countered with a brief negative comment. I myself blundered into the fray on the side of Utopianism in *Moreana*, Nos. 31/32 (1971), and Allen's response to my remarks appeared concurrently. In a recent issue of the journal *New Literary History*, VI (1975), J. H. Hexter leveled his formidable ordnance at Allen's latter discussion. Hexter's intricate argument eventually focuses on the wording of the conclusion to *Utopia*, the reaction of the character More to Hythloday's account. That argument modifies and enlarges on some points of the well-known interpretation that Hexter presented in his *More's UTOPIA, The Biography of an Idea* (1952) and developed in his introductory essay to the *Utopia* volume of the *Yale Complete Works* (1965). The present article will, I believe, challenge and reward the reader who carefully follows the subtleties of its argument. I am sure, however, that it will not stand as the last word on the subject: for man's dilapidated state is not yet fully repaired.]

MORE's final argument in *Utopia* against community of property is "palpably silly and insincere." So Professor J. H. Hexter has argued.¹ After More finishes his account of Hythloday's discourse, he turns to the reader and speaks two sentences. The first has 149 words, 19 of which form a relative clause, *qua una re funditus euertitur omnis nobilitas, magnificentia, splendor, maiestas, uera ut publica est opinio decora atque ornamenta Reipublicae* (CW, IV, 244). The tone of this clause is pertinent to any interpretation of *Utopia*. Professor Hexter has been arguing, since 1952, that the tone is ironic.

The strokes of the professor's proof are sweeping; the mode, impres-

sionistic. The impression at the opening of the argument flickers from the subjunctive mood, the ambiguous passive voice, and an adjective: "Still it may be argued that when More got back to England he had a sober second thought."² The impression which follows breaks from blustering adjectives. More's defense of private property at the end of *Utopia* is "vapid" and "frivolous." Any present day reader, Mr. Hexter says, will think so. More thought so. And all his contemporaries thought so. "Not one of those contemporaries would have maintained for a moment that what mattered in a commonwealth were splendor, magnificence, and majesty" (pp. 36-7). Against this last impression, public buildings, paintings, and apparel, More's "Great House," his chain of gold, the gorgeous folio edition of his *Confutation* stand witness. So do the words of More's contemporaries. Among those authors cited under *splendor* in the commentary to the *Yale Utopia* is More's friend, Erasmus:

In those matters which pertain to public affairs (such as public buildings or games) the prince should not be extravagant or lavish, but splendid: so, too, in receiving embassies that relate to the affairs of his people. (CW, 568)

Cicero has provided a list of concrete examples of *magnificentia*, "walls, docks, harbours, aqueducts, . . . theatres, colonnades, and new temples" (CW, 567). This list, we are told, "becomes standard in the Renaissance" (CW, 567). That "Not one of those contemporaries would have maintained for a moment" is a bold, but erroneous, claim.

The impression now shifts from More's contemporaries to More himself and his estimate of "the role that splendor, magnificence, and majesty play in this world" (p. 37). A short stroke from More's *Dialogue of Comfort* illustrates More's contempt for these attributes; and, from this to *Utopia*. There is the extravagant display of the Anemolian ambassadors; which, Mr. Hexter imagines, is autobiographical. With dramatic strokes he pictures More parading as an ambassador and enters More's mind: "And although it is unlikely that any Flemish child on that occasion called poor More a lubber, there was little need to; no doubt he felt a great enough lubber nevertheless" (p. 38). From this imaginative scene, Mr. Hexter unveils the most secret part of More's being, that part which is "deeper than his discriminating intellect and rational consciousness" (p. 38). From the depths of this being comes a confirmation of what More would have felt about three of the four attributes, proper to a commonwealth.

Not only the most eloquent passages of *Utopia* but his whole life and character are a living and total repudiation on his part of the conspicuous consumption and the false and invidious discriminations implied for him in the terms, "magnificence, splendor, majesty." When he carefully selects that particular group of words to support his "defense" of private property, we may justly

suspect the sincerity of his ardor for the cause. Under the circumstances it is really not a defense at all; it is simply treason within the citadel. (p. 38)

But this argument has flaws. If More's admiration for Utopia and Hythloday is without reservation, More's final defense of private property is frivolous and vapid. More's agreement with Hythloday's opinions would reveal the irony of the defense. Though the extent of More's sympathy with Hythloday and the Utopians is a point in dispute, Mr. Hexter has assumed that Hythloday's voice is More's. As to the Anemolian ambassadors, More is satirizing extravagance in embassies. But the amusement of the Utopians rises out of their being duped by the cunning of their leaders. This raises the suspicion that both the Anemolians and the Utopians are objects of More's satire. Another flaw is in fancying what More thought, while he was parading as an ambassador. This is pleasant. Nevertheless, human feelings are too ambivalent for reduction to simplicity, regularity, and continuity. There is a world of room for doubt when one speculates about the innermost regions of another man's being. Speaking from this region, Mr. Hexter fancies that More would associate majesty with "conspicuous consumption" and "false and invidious discriminations"; yet, at the very time that More was writing the second book of *Utopia* he was also composing a long letter to Martin Dorp in which *maiestatem* describes worthy Roman senators.³ Another flaw in the confirmation, as in the whole course of this argument, is that Mr. Hexter omits *nobilitas* from the list of attributes which More has named as dependent in a commonwealth on the exchange of money. Yet another is in the loading of the argument with adjectives, for example, *eloquent, whole, living, total, conspicuous, false, invidious*, in the short passage which I have quoted. Finally, the conclusion to the argument is tentative. From the hesitant "we may justly suspect," to the "treason within the citadel," there is a leap of faith.

Because I have challenged this conclusion, Professor Hexter assumes that I am invincibly ignorant, even though he has abandoned the platform of his argument. Whereas in 1952 he wrote, "Not one of those contemporaries would have maintained for a moment that what mattered in a commonwealth were splendor, magnificence, and majesty," he now writes,

In general, in the early sixteenth century, the terms *nobility* and *majesty* almost always bore a strongly positive charge; they were honorific. This was true only a little less frequently of *magnificence* and *splendor*.⁴

This being true, the professor now insists that "the immediate context leads nowhere, and the historical context, the contemporary values placed on *nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty* by public opin-

ion, does not entail that More set the same values on them or intended his readers to do so" (p. 536). So, he has supplied a new foundation for his argument.

This foundation he grounds on a technique of literary composition which has been widespread from ancient to modern times. By throwing a context of ideas and images about a word, a writer brings to a final statement toward the end of his work the whole force of a variety of contexts. Thus, in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, King Henry says,

I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land
To wash this blood off from my guilty hand. (V.vi.50)

Now, from various speeches by various speakers in the play the word *blood* accumulates a wide scope of meanings, images, and associations. The reader knows more about blood than King Henry does. The reader knows, for instance, that in the future Englishmen will manure English ground with their blood because of Henry's revolt against King Richard. Since King Richard has compared Henry to Pilate, a reader is prepared for two views of Henry; Richard's that he is a Pilate who can never wash blood from his hands, Henry's that he will wash the blood from his hands by a voyage to the Holy Land. The whole matter awaits conclusion until the end of *The Second Part of Henry IV*. Henry, detained from a voyage to the Holy Land by business of state and wars, is at the point of death. He learns that he has fallen sick in a lodging called Jerusalem. "Laud be to God," he exclaims,

But bear me to that chamber; there I'll lie,
In that Jerusalem shall Harry die. (IV.v.239-40)

Shakespeare's overtones and suggestions are obvious.

Mr. Hexter claims that More has used this literary device to establish More's tone at the end of *Utopia*. By tracing through *Utopia* Hythloday's uses of *nobilitas, magnificentia, splendor, and maiestas*, Mr. Hexter determines the tone of More's use of these words and separates More from his historical context. This raises two questions. Is the method applicable here? Is there a sufficient context for governing the tone of this clause?

The method is applicable only if a reader believes that More's sentiments and Hythloday's conform in every respect, for it is Hythloday whose words establish the context. If their sentiments are identical, there is no argument. It is not surprising that Hythloday generally rejects the European views of nobility, splendor, and majesty. So then, if one holds the faith that Hythloday speaks More's mind, More too rejects these views. And this is Mr. Hexter's faith. "Thus," he writes, "in *Utopia*, More says that in Europe treaties are 'holy and inviolable . . . through reverence

and fear of the Sovereign Pontiff" (p. 536). To assign the speech to More simply assumes that Hythloday is More's mouthpiece.

In demonstrating this method, Mr. Hexter spins a convoluted argument.

Hythloday does not use the word *magnificentia*, but the other three words he uses twelve times; *nobilitas* twice in one sentence where he exposes the counterfeit pleasure of false nobility (CW, 168); *splendor* twice in a single context, where he describes the extravagant display of the Anemolian ambassadors; and *maiestas* eight times, five of which uses refer to Divine Majesty. These five Mr. Hexter eliminates. There are, then, for *maiestas* three applicable passages. In one Hythloday acknowledges that true majesty may adhere to a throne, thus admitting that there is such a quality as majesty (CW, 94). Mr. Hexter agrees that the honorific tone of the word clings to it in this passage. In the other two he catches ironic overtones: "the offended majesty" (*aduersus numen imperatoriae maiestatis*; CW, 88-9) and "the majesty of treaties" (*maiestas foederum*; CW 196-7). If More has set these four terms up as key terms and if More's ironic tone rests upon an understanding of Hythloday's use of them, there are questions to ask. Why has More not prepared the reader for *magnificentia*? Why has he isolated *splendor* and *nobilitas* in single passages? Why has he blurred the tone of *maiestas* by referring the word to Divine Majesty? Whereas Shakespeare makes an obvious pattern of his images of blood and Pilate, More has woven a pattern of his four words which is incomplete, scattered, and ambiguous.

Mr. Hexter meets this difficulty by counting in *Utopia* words which are cognates of *majesty*, *splendor*, *nobility*, and *magnificence*.

There are no cognates of *maiestas*. Thus, the ambiguity about the use of that word remains.

There are two cognates of *splendor*. In one case Hythloday is describing the Polylerites. He says of them, "Being completely free from militarism they live a life more comfortable than splendid (*splendide*) and more happy than renowned or famous (*nobiles*), for even their name, I think, is hardly known except to their immediate neighbors" (CW, 75). To Hythloday's mind this choice of the Polylerites against *splendor* and fame is a proper one. But More has supplied sufficient hints about Hythloday's love of fame to cast a touch of irony on Hythloday's enthusiasm for the life of the Polylerites. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Hythloday uses *splendide* in a pejorative sense. In the second use, Hythloday compares the happiness of a man in Utopia, who is free from worries and the querulous demands of a wife, to an unjust commonwealth where noblemen, bankers, and moneylenders live a *lautam ac*

splendidam uitam (CW, 238). Neither use of *splendidus* is distinguished or memorable.

Odd as it may seem, cognates for *nobilitas*, the very attribute which is missing from Mr. Hexter's argument in his 1952 book, now furnish the strongest plank in his new argument. Of the twelve occurrences of cognates for *nobilitas*, nine are as a noun designating social rank. Given Hythloday's views, it is no surprise that the nine occurrences add up to a bad case for nobles. Now, Mr. Hexter links nobles and nobility together with an argument—from a broad historical context, let it be noted—which is ingenious but incorrect.

It might be argued that the condemnation of the social order of nobles in *Utopia* has nothing to do with the quality of *nobilitas*; but of course it has to do with it. In the sixteenth century to dissociate quality from social rank, a process which we find so easy and natural, was hard and most unnatural. To do it, one had to wrench free of longstanding assumptions about the supposed "natural" correspondences of qualities with entities. In those days, the natural thing to do was to ascribe the high qualities of nobility to the high social rank, the nobles, to whom they were naturally appropriate. (p. 539)

"It might be argued," to be sure, but by whom? For one, by More—who, in the letter written to Dorp during that time when More was composing the second book of *Utopia*, illustrated a point about theologians by dissociating quality from social rank:

... there is no group without a large number of unworthy members. Just as in the Roman Senate there were men whose dignity was equaled by no kings, so also there were some so mean and dishonorable that they met a wretched end by being crushed to death at the public games. However, the baseness of these men was no obstacle to the splendor of the former, nor did the name of Senator save their meanness from disdain.⁵

So, More himself separates quality from social rank. What More says is such a common topic of the sixteenth century that it would be superfluous to cite instances from such satires as Gascoigne's "The Steele Glas." To separate nobility from noblemen would have offered no difficulty to that company of readers which More had in the front of his mind, Erasmus, Giles, Tunstal, Budé, Lupset, Warham, Wolsey, Vives, Fisher, Busleyden, Pace, Ammonio. The highest born of them all was Tunstal, the bastard son of a northern nobleman. Even the populace had always taunted titled lords:

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?

So, nine of the twelve cognates of *nobilitas* fall into dubiety. "Be that as it may," writes Mr. Hexter—"that" referring to unnatural dissociation of

quality from social rank—"nobilis fares little better in its adjectival than in its substantive guise" (p. 539). The Polylerites prefer, according to Mr. Hexter's translation, "the joyful life to the noble" (p. 539). But the common opinion of translators is that the Polylerites prefer the joyful life to renown. So, one use of the three adjectives is out. Of the original twelve uses of cognates of *nobilitas* two remain. The Utopians consider a man to be mad if he thinks "himself more noble on account of the texture of a finer wool" (CW, 157). Here "noble" assumes a positive value against which foolish intentions strive. And so it is in the other use where *nobiles* occurs in the very sentence with Hythloday's two uses of the noun *nobilitas*. The Yale commentary on this sentence confirms a reader's sense that More hides a high standard of *nobilitas* behind Hythloday's satiric notions:

nobilitatis opinione . . . Here as elsewhere (e.g., 244/20) it is with considerable ambivalence that More uses *nobilitas* as he does other terms which were honorific in sixteenth-century society but whose original conception had been tarnished by overuse. When More employs such expressions pejoratively, he is emphasizing the gulf between the high ideal and the accepted standard. (CW, 454)

This note points to that passage in *Utopia* which Mr. Hexter thus paraphrases in his summary of Hythloday's coloring of the word *nobilitas*: "As to *nobilitas*, the only way to nobility nowadays is to have 'the fortune to be born of ancestors of whom a long succession has been considered rich'" (p. 539). But there is a passage in *Utopia* which puts More apart from Hythloday's position. At the outset of *Utopia* More introduces his readers to a man, whose birth like Erasmus' was tarnished with illegitimacy, and yet who through merit had become a high personage in the English court, Cuthbert Tunstal. This squarely counters Hythloday's claim that nobility in Europe can be found by way of wealth only. More's use of *nobilitas* at the end of *Utopia* is illuminated in the Yale edition by a passage from Erasmus' *Institutio principis Christiani*, published only a few months before *Utopia*:

For Erasmus, there are "three kinds of nobility: the first is derived from virtue and good actions; the second comes from acquaintance with the best of training; and the third from an array of family portraits and the genealogy or wealth. It by no means becomes a prince to swell with pride over this lowest degree of nobility, for it is so low that it is nothing at all, unless it has itself sprung from virtue. Neither must he neglect the first, which is so far the first that it alone can be considered in the strictest judgment." (CW, 567)

Tunstal, not entitled to a high place in court by the third, and least, sort of *nobilitas*, rose by the first and second sorts. On the threshold of *Utopia*, then, stands a model which protects the high ideal of *nobilitas*.

So, of Mr. Hexter's twelve cognates of *nobilitas*, nine depend for their staining of *nobilitas* upon an argument which is erroneous, one must be strained into an unnatural translation in order to apply, and two suggest a high ideal of *nobilitas*, an ideal which More has placed at the very threshold of *Utopia*.

While *nobilitas* furnishes the strongest plank for the foundation of Mr. Hexter's theory, *magnificentia* and its cognates *magnificus* and *magnifice* furnish the weakest. *Magnificentia* occurs nowhere in *Utopia* except in More's final speech. Of its cognates Mr. Hexter writes that these "three occurrences are too ambiguous or in contexts too deficient in directional signs to warrant any inferences" and that the "three occurrences of *magnificentia* eluded effective contextual analysis" (pp. 537, 539). In the first use of a cognate of *magnificentia*, More describes the Burgomaster of Bruges as *uir magnificus* (CW, 46). Since there is no reason to think that he intends to satirize the Burgomaster, we are left to think that More uses the word straightforwardly. In the last use Hythloday is describing those estates in conquered territory which the Utopians retain in perpetuity and to which they dispatch Financial Agents who live *magnifice* (CW, 214). Now when the Utopians live in great style, it is difficult to think that Hythloday would disapprove of their way of life. This gives us some reason to think that he approves of *magnifice*. As a matter of fact, he does. He describes the city-states of Utopia as *spatiosas omnes ac magnificas* (CW, 112).

Which leads to a word about "directional signs." Mr. Hexter describes three pigs. One is an imaginary pig in a story. One is a policeman. One is a woman. By this he illustrates that words must have directional signs. In his *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, More tells of some Lollards "that put a pygge in to the water, on good frydaye/ and sayd go in pygge and come oute pyke/ and so when they had chaunged the name, they toke yt for fyshe and ete yt" (CW, VIII, 122). All of Mr. Hexter's pigs are something other than pigs, but named pigs. When pigs are simply pigs, a reader recognizes a pig as a pig. Disguised objects need directional signs of context.

Mr. Hexter finds no clue to Hythloday's tone in *spatiosas omnes ac magnificas*. That is because Hythloday means magnificent. He describes Utopian cities as magnificent, a concept which Mr. Hexter has construed as implying for More "conspicuous consumption" and "false and invidious discriminations." Hythloday, then, admires magnificence. More does also. At the very time that More was composing his letter to Dorp he was composing a poem of admiration for the magnificence of a private house, *Ad Buslidium de aedibus magnificis Mechilinae*. In a letter to Erasmus, written in February 1516, More has revealed his great regard for his

friendship with Busleyden, who, More points out, is wealthy, a magnificent host.

Even though Mr. Hexter's argument satisfies him, and will many other readers, I remain sceptical of his proof. He cannot account for one keyword, *magnificentia*. Both Hythloday and More value this quality. In another keyword, there are five occurrences, a majority for that word, which are honorific. These Mr. Hexter lops off without considering their effect on More's final use of the word. In the end Mr. Hexter has six occurrences for his contextual analysis of four words: *maiestas* 2, *nobilitas* 2 (in a single sentence), *splendor* 2 (in a single passage), *magnificentia* 0. This muster of words is too slight, and too clustered, to form a significant context. Therefore, Mr. Hexter has supplied a study of cognates for these words: *nobilis* 12, *splendidus* 2. He admits that there would be room for argument about nine of the uses of *nobilis*, except for the fact that it would have been "hard and most unnatural" in the sixteenth century "to dissociate quality from social rank" (p. 539). Since Mr. Hexter overstates the fact, there remains room for argument about the said nine uses of *nobilis*. Of the surviving three, one applies only if it is seen in the light of an idiosyncratic meaning and translation. Four cognates apply. Of these, two are open to a counter interpretation. To expect in a work as involved as *Utopia* six uses of four different words and four uses of cognates of those words to supply a context for reading the tone of those four words is to stretch literary interpretation into flaccidity.

An example will illustrate the point. Hythloday tells us that the Utopians are "leisure-loving," *otio gaudens* (CW, IV, 178). In the Yale commentary there is this note: "This is a rare case in which *otium* is used in *Utopia* in a meliorative rather than a pejorative sense" (CW, 465). Contextual analysis would lead us to conclude that Hythloday, having prepared a pejorative context for *otium*, is now undercutting the Utopians.

There remains in Mr. Hexter's argument a discussion of one phrase, *ut publica est opinio* (CW, 244). The Yale rendering, "in the estimation of the common people" (CW, 245), Mr. Hexter confesses to having slightly modified to "such is public opinion." To my mind, he has changed the whole drift of the translation. The difference between his and the Yale version is the difference between saying, "In the estimation of common people Westminster Abbey is a magnificent building," and "It is common opinion that Westminster Abbey is a magnificent building." Mr. Hexter is correct. Though the Yale rendering is not wrong, it is too restrictive; More has not written *opinio vulgi*. But for public or common opinion in praise of *nobilitas*, *magnificentia*, *splendor*, and *maiestas*, the Yale com-

mentary enlists a distinguished company: Aristotle, Erasmus, Pontano, Aquinas, Cicero, Poggio, Platina, Palmieri, and others. Nevertheless, by relying on Hythloday's opinions of European civilization as depraved, Professor Hexter concludes that, "As a character in *Utopia*, More can know no other public opinion" (p. 540). Even if one grants that a reader can wash from his mind every honorific image of these four qualities and every statement concerning them by European thinkers, there is one place in *Utopia* where More does, indeed, know another kind of public opinion. It will be recalled that More makes a point at the outset of *Utopia* of Cuthbert Tunstal's having been created Master of the Rolls. He adds, *ingenti omnium gratulatione*, "to everyone's immense satisfaction" (CW, 46-47). And that is public opinion in depraved England, transferred into *Utopia*. Mr. Hexter has argued that "one of the proper devices of satire is irony, which makes its point by stating as true what is manifestly not so"; and, so he says, "context provided by public opinion will not quite do in a work like *Utopia*" (p. 536). But More means what he says about Tunstal and, it seems likely, about the public satisfaction at Tunstal's appointment. There are, then, places in *Utopia* where More offers unironic statements. He is speaking in his own voice at the opening of *Utopia*. And so he is in the conclusion. If he is plain and direct in one place, there are grounds for assuming that he is in the other.

Professor Hexter has argued that the broad historical context offers no help in interpreting the tone of More's statement and that the immediate context of ideas concerning nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty is insufficient for use in interpretation, because More may not have set the same values on them as his age did. So Professor Hexter has turned to contextual analysis.

In this case, contextual analysis is unsatisfactory. From the historical context, broad and immediate, a reader secures a clear definition for nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty and, thus, understands exactly what More is accepting or rejecting. Because More was a prolific writer, it is possible to discover passages where he does discuss these ideas and sets certain values on them. In addition to historical contexts, a reader should consider the context of More's farewell in *Utopia* itself. More says that some Utopian customs are absurd. Are they? More reminds the reader of a failing in Hythloday's character. Is he serious? More leaves the discussion of Utopian life unresolved. Is he suggesting that the subject has not been closed? Pursuit of tone along these lines seems more fruitful than a reliance upon fragmentary and scattered uses of four words and their cognates.

Disagreement over this passage rests, I suspect, on initial disagreement as to how to read *Utopia*. In 1952 Mr. Hexter wrote, "We ourselves shall

have to look very closely to separate the thinker's thought from the literary trick of trade."⁶ He still sees *Utopia* as an argument concealed in literary wrappings. More's literary devices are, to my mind, a means for making the experience of visiting Utopia real. The visitor comes away from the experience, as he does from most experiences, with an ambivalent and puzzled view. More encourages just such a view when he steps into his work to have a last word about this strange experience.

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¹ More's *UTOPIA, The Biography of an Idea* (1952; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 39.

² P. 35. This proof is found on pp. 35-9. Succeeding citations of the book will appear in the text.

³ Elizabeth Frances Rogers, ed., *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1947), p. 56.

⁴ "Intention, Words, and Meaning: The Case of More's *Utopia*," *New Literary History*, VI (1975), 536. Subsequent references to Hexter, unless otherwise noted, will be to this article and will be included in the text.

⁵ Rogers, ed., *St. Thomas More: Selected Letters* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1961), pp. 41-2.

⁶ More's *UTOPIA*, p. 4.