

UTOPIA'S CHICKENS COME HOME TO ROOST

A light touch that always amuses readers of *Utopia* is the « *Mira ratio fouendi oua*, » the account of the artificial incubation of chickens that in the modern English rendition concludes : « As soon as they come out of the shell, the chicks follow and acknowledge humans as their mothers ! » (*CW*, IV, 114/115). The Yale editors struggle with the source problem but conclude : « More might have introduced the phenomenon purely as a humorous touch ... or he might have observed it in action » (*CW*, IV, 389). This past year Dale B. Billingsley added Sir John Mandeville to the possible sources (*Moreana*, No. 67-68, 80), but he too attributes « the following-instinct in chicks ... to More's observant imagination. » Without questioning the Yale editors' citation of More's « peculiar delight » in observing nature, it is now clear that he had a literary source easily available. That this source has not been previously noticed is strange since it occurs in one of the more famous woodcut-embellished incunabula, a substantial and popular work that went into eight editions in five languages before 1500 and even more editions before *Utopia* was penned. Furthermore, as J. D. M. Derrett suggested as long ago as 1966, this book was probably the inspiration of the famous Utopian alphabet (*Moreana*, No. 12, 61-65).

The discovery was made by one of the scholars represented in the *More Essential Articles*, Prof. Rudolf Gottfried of Indiana University. Since his present health does not permit him to whip the material into shape, he has communicated the vital clues to the undersigned amanuensis. A couple of hours with the rarities in the Rosenwald and Thatcher collections of the Library of Congress have provided the necessary documentation.

After an extensive pilgrimage in the Near East in 1483-1484, Bernard von Breydenbach penned a voluminous account known as the *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam*. The illustrated original was published at Mainz in February 1486, followed in the same year by a Mainz German version and in succeeding years in other languages from various presses. Since these early editions are unpaginated and often not even signed, the searcher may be informed that the passage in question occurs in the latter part of the book, just before the section headed « *De transitu ex Chayro per Nylum versus alexandriam*. » Breydenbach briefly describes the large incubators in which the Egyptians placed three or four thousand eggs of chickens, ducks, geese and pigeons. Since the *editio princeps* was not accessible in Washington, the key passage is here quoted from the

1490 Speyer edition (sig. m8), with some expansion of dubious contractions, one verbal emendation, and the omission of two misleading periods :

... et ita absque incubatione matrum excubantur simulque sub manu pastoris ad pascua ducuntur vt oues vel ad forum vt ibi vendantur. Et quamvis id fictitium videri possit. tamen reuera ita sese habet. nimirum animalia illa que humana arte et industria excubantur disciplinabiliora sunt his que secundum naturam sue speciei generantur. sequuntur enim homines sicut pulli suas matres.

The 1486 German version follows the Latin closely but clarifies the structure of the incubator as « ein grosser backoffen » -- a large bake-oven. In troublesome spelling, the key passage reads as follows (verso of unfoliated leaf 137) :

... wan die chyclyn die durch sollich menschlich klügheyt werden vss gebrüthet. lassen sich ee zemen und lauffen den menschen ee nach dan die andern disen yn der nature glich.

The 1488 French version from Lyons is not a literal rendering like the later 1490 edition, and the reviser adds a bit of local color suggesting clucking hens (sig. pl) :

Et combien que il semble estre une fiction si est il ainsi pour verite. et nest pas de merueilles se telles bestes produictes [de] industrie humaine sont plus domestiques que les aultres car ils entendent la voix de leur nourricier comme les poules congnoissent leur mere.

More's Latin does not show verbal borrowings that would identify his direct source. One would expect him to have used a Latin edition. During his Netherlands visit, when he began *Utopia*, there was available a 1488 Flemish/Dutch version that Peter Giles probably would have scorned. In his communication to his amanuensis, Prof. Gottfried suggested that the article should be allowed to follow its incubator and the name Williams. There is no harm in that as long as readers realize the Gottfriedian source of the egg ! Perhaps a zealous young amicus will be moved to read a modern edition of Breydenbach in search of possible borrowings in addition to the Utopian alphabet and chickens ?