

## Interpretation of *Utopia* as a Whole — Remarks

John Boyle

Thomas More tips his hand in the letter to Peter Giles that serves as an afterword to *Utopia*, in which he says that this work is a kind of medicine smeared with honey. The question that confronts the reader is simply this: what medicine is so bitter as to require such exquisite honey? More never tells us outright.

But it must be something to be so skillfully disguised from his audience. And who was his audience? Principally, his fellow humanist scholars, among the most remarkable intellectuals of the day. He gave them a work of arresting cleverness and humor, filled with wordplay and allusions that only the well educated intellectual could appreciate. But this is not simply entertainment. It is medicine. So what did More want to say to his fellow humanists, perhaps more broadly to intellectuals who make their way in the world by their smarts, that he dare not say directly?

That he dare not say it means not that he was timid and feared their wrath. More endured much wrath from various humanists, and, I think we can say, was frightened by no man. Rather, his fear is that he might not be heard; he might not be effective.

So what is this medicine? Let me propose one possibility. We might put More's caution to those who live by their wits in this way: Don't be Rafael Hythlodæus. In taking stock of Hythlodæus, we find the good. He is adventurous and bold and courageous. He is strong willed and determined. And he is smart; he is well educated and, even more, clearly has strong native intelligence. But we also find the bad in Hythlodæus. He is self-centered; his professed principle in life is "I live as I will." He will not serve others; he is self-serving. He is proud. He is proud of his adventures; even more, he is proud of his ideas. He is stubborn. He will never concede an argument or even a point within an argument. For all of the immediate novelty of some of his ideas, he is close-minded.

If one were to strip away the global adventurer and simply think of the intellectual adventurer, has not More described many an intellectual, many a man who makes his way by his intelligence. We have, perhaps, someone who is intellectually bold and adventurous, often, perhaps necessarily, strong willed. But just such folk are also all too often stubborn, unwilling to bend before superior argument. Their lives are lives ordered to their own ideas, to living as they will. Even one's ideas come to be bent in service of one's own will. It is remarkably easy

for those of us (and I might as well now shift to the first person) who live by our intelligence to take on the character flaws of Raphael Hythlodæus; our very pride, arising from our own presumed smarts and self-knowledge, blinds us to what is happening.

Here is where I think the role of Christianity in *Utopia* is so important. For Hythlodæus, even religion, even his own faith, is subordinated to himself. We might return to the defining reality of the City of God: love. Can it be said of Hythlodæus (as it could so astoundingly be said of St. Thomas More), that his life was ordered to the two great commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind; this is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."