

Prefatory Epistle



THOMAS MORE TO PETER GILES, GREETINGS

I AM ALMOST ashamed, right well-beloved Peter Giles, to send you this book of the Utopian commonwealth, well nigh after a year's space, which I am sure you looked for within a month and a half.* And no marvel. For you know well enough that I was already disburdened of all the labor and study belonging to the invention of this work, and that I had no need at all to trouble my brains about the disposition or conveyance of that matter and, therefore, had nothing else to do but only to rehearse those things which you and I together heard Master Raphael tell and declare.† Wherefore there was no cause why I should study to set forth the matter with eloquence; for as much as his talk could not be fine and eloquent, being first not studied for but sudden and

This epistle appears in the four original editions of Utopia, located as it is here, immediately preceding Book I.

* As chronicled in the book itself, More met with Giles on an abortive diplomatic trip to Flanders a year earlier, where he began to work on *Utopia*.

† Master Raphael is Raphael Hythloday.

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unpremeditated, and then, as you know, of a man better seen in the Greek language than in the Latin tongue.* And my writing, the nearer it should approach his homely, plain, and simple speech, so much the nearer should it go to the truth; which is the only mark, where unto I do and ought to direct all my travail and study herein.

I grant and confess, friend Peter, myself discharged of so much labor, having all these things ready done to my hand, that almost there was nothing left for me to do. Else either the invention, or the disposition of this matter, might have required of a wit neither base nor at all unlearned, both some time and leisure, and also some study. But if it was requisite and necessary that the matter should also have been written eloquently, and not alone truly, of a surety that thing I could have performed by no time or study. But now, seeing all these cares, stays, and hindrances were taken away, wherein else so much labor and study should have been employed, and that there remained no other thing for me to do but only to write plainly the matter as I heard it spoken, that indeed was a thing light and easy to be done. Howbeit, to the dispatching of this so little business my other cares and troubles did leave almost less than no leisure. While I do daily bestow my time about law matters; some to plead, some to hear, some as an arbitrator with mine award to determine, some as an

* Among Renaissance scholars the reverse would be true, with mastery of Latin more common than Greek.

umpire or a judge with my sentence finally to discuss; while I go one way to see and visit my friend, an other way about mine own private affairs; while I spend almost all the day abroad amongst others and then reside at home among mine own, I leave to my myself, I mean to my book, no time.*

For when I come home, I must commune with my wife, chat with my children, and talk with my servants.† All the which things I reckon and account among business, forasmuch as they must of necessity be done; and done must they need be unless a man will be a stranger in his own house. And, in any wise, a man must so fashion and order his conditions, and so appoint and dispose himself, that he be merry, jocund, and pleasant among them whom either nature has provided, or chance has made, or he himself has chosen to be the fellows and companions of his life: so that with too much gentle behavior and familiarity he do not mar them, and by too much sufferance of his servants make them his masters. Among these things now rehearsed steal away the day, the month, the year. When do I write then? And all this while I have spoken no word of sleep, neither yet of meals, which among a great number do waste no less time than does sleep, wherein almost half the time of

* More was a very busy man in 1516: a prominent lawyer and one of two Undersheriffs of London, as well as judge in the Sheriff's Court and arbitrator in the Court of Chancery.

† More, at the time of this writing, was married to his second wife and living with four children born to his first wife and one step-child from his second.

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man creepeth away. I, therefore, do win and get only that time which I steal from sleep and meals.* Which time, because it is very little, and yet somewhat it is, therefore have I once at the last, though it be long first, finished *Utopia* and have sent it to you Peter to read and peruse to the intent that if anything has escaped me you might put me in remembrance of it. For though in this behalf I do not greatly mistrust myself (which would God I were somewhat in wit and learning, as I am not all of the worst and dullest in memory), yet have I not so great trust and confidence in it that I think nothing could fall out of my mind.

For John Clement, my boy, who as you know was there present with us, whom I suffer to be away from no talk wherein may be any profit or goodness (for out of this young-bladed and new-shot-up corn, which has already begun to spring up both in Latin and Greek language, I look for plentiful increase at length of goodly ripe grain), he, I say, has brought me into great doubt.† For whereas Hythloday (unless my memory fail me) said that the bridge of Amaurot, which goes over the river of Anyder, is five hundred paces, that is to say, half a mile, in length; my John saith that two

* More is said to have slept only four to five hours a night, waking up at two in the morning to begin his day.

† John Clement was, indeed, a servant of More's, and accompanied him on his diplomatic mission to the Netherlands in 1515. He "ripened" well, learning Latin and Greek (the latter well enough to become Reader in Greek at Oxford), becoming a respected physician, and later president of the College of Physicians, and marrying More's adopted daughter.

hundred of these paces must be plucked away, for that the river contains there not above three hundred paces in breadth. I pray you heartily call the matter to your remembrance. For if you agree with him I also will say as you say and confess myself deceived. But if you cannot remember the thing, then surely I will write as I have done, and as mine own remembrance serves me. For as I shall take good heed that there be in my book nothing false, so if there be anything in doubt I will rather tell a lie then make a lie, because I had rather be good than wise.*

Note the theological distinction between telling a lie and making a lie

Howbeit, this matter may easily be remedied if you will take the pains to ask the question of Raphael himself, by word of mouth if he be now with you, or else by your letters; which you must need do for an other doubt also, which has chanced through, whose fault I cannot tell, whether through mine or yours or Raphael's. For neither we remembered to inquire of him, nor he to tell us, in what part of that new world Utopia is situated; which thing I had rather have spent no small sum of money than it should thus have escaped us. As well for that I am ashamed to be ignorant of what sea that Island standeth whereof I write so long a treatise; as also because there be with us certain men, and especially one devout and godly man, who is exceeding desirous to go unto Utopia, not for a vain and curious desire to see news, but to the intent that he may further and

* Other translations read "wise" as "wily" (Sacks).

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increase our religion which is there already begun. And that he may the better accomplish and perform this his good intent, he is minded to procure that he may be sent there by the high Bishop, yes, and that he himself made be made Bishop of Utopia; being nothing scrupulous herein, that he may obtain this bishopric with suit.* For he counteth that a godly suit which proceeds not of the desire of honor or lucre but only of a godly zeal.

A holy suit

Wherefore, I most earnestly desire you, friend Peter, to talk with Hythloday, if you can face to face, or else write letters to him, and so to work in this matter that in this, my book, there may be neither anything be found that is untrue, neither anything be lacking which is true. And I think verily it shall be well done that you show unto him the book itself, for if I have missed or failed in any point, or find any fault that has escaped me, no man can so well correct and amend it as he can, and yet that can he not do unless he peruse and read over my book written. Moreover, by this means shall you perceive whether he will be willing and content that I should undertake to put this work in writing. For if he be minded to publish and put forth his own labors and travails himself, perchance he would be loathe, and so would I also, that in publishing the Utopian commonwealth I should prevent and take from him the flower and grace of the novelty of this his history.

* The word translated here and in the marginalia as “suit” can mean both a petition for office and corruption in attaining an office; given More and Giles’s propensity for puns, both meanings were likely intended.

Howbeit, to say the very truth, I am not fully determined with myself whether I will put forth my book or no. For the natures of men be so divers, the fantasies of some so wayward, their minds so unkind, their judgments so corrupt that they which lead a merry and jocund life following their own sensual pleasures and carnal lusts, may seem to be in a much better state or case than they that vex and unquiet themselves with cares and studies for putting forth and publishing of something, that may be either profit or pleasure to others, which others nevertheless will disdainfully, scornfully, and unkindly accept the same. The most part of all be unlearned, and a great number hold learning in contempt. The rude and barbarous allow nothing but that which is is very barbarous indeed. If it be one that has a little smack of learning, he rejects as homely and common-ware whatsoever is not stuffed full of old moth-eaten words and that be worn out of use. Some there be that have pleasure only in old rustic antiquities, and some only in their own doings. One is so sour, so crabbed, and so unpleasant that he can abide with no mirth or sport; another is so narrow between the shoulders, that he can bear no jests or taunts. Some silly poor souls be so afraid that at every snappish word their nose shall be bitten off* that they stand in no less dread of every quick and sharp word

*The ungrateful
judgments of men*

*Flat-nosed he calls
men with no nose*

* Or "flat-nosed," as it is otherwise translated. As the nose was considered the organ of derision, a person whose nose is bitten off is incapable of appreciating satire and without wit.

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then he that is bitten of a mad dog fears water. Some be so mutable and wavering that every hour they be in a new mind, saying one thing sitting and another thing standing. Another sort sits upon their ale benches, and there among their cups they give judgment of the wits of writers and with great authority they condemn even as please them every writer according to his writing in most spiteful manner mocking, louting, and flouting them: being themselves in the mean season safe and, as sayeth the proverb, out of all danger of gunshot. For why they be so smug and smooth that they have not so much as one hair of an honest man whereby one may take hold of them. There be, moreover, some so unkind and ungentle that though they take great pleasure and delectation in the work, yet for all that they can not find in their hearts to love the author thereof, nor to afford him a good word, being much like uncourteous, unthankful, and churlish guests, which when they have with good and dainty meats well filled their bellies, depart home giving no thanks to the feast-maker. Go your ways now, and make a costly feast at your own charges for guests so dainty-mouthed, so divers in taste, and besides that, of so unkind and unthankful natures.

But nevertheless, friend Peter, do I pray you with Hythloday as I willed you before, and as for this matter, I shall be at my liberty afterwards to take new advisement. Howbeit, seeing I have taken great pains and labor in writing the matter, if it may stand with his mind and

A proverb

*A marvelous
comparison*

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pleasure, I will, as touching the edition or publishing of the book, follow the counsel and advice of my friends, and especially yours. Thus fare you well, right

heartily beloved friend Peter, with
your gentle wife; and love
me as you have ever done;
for I love you better
then I ever did.