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Thomas More's Magnificent Utopia Transcript

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Thomas More's Magnificent *Utopia*

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For those interested in Thomas More—which I take the liberty of assuming includes all of us here—the end of November 2016 is a rather special date. For it marks nothing less than the five-hundredth anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*. Though More was a Londoner, the book first appeared at Louvain, from the press of the publisher Thierry Martin. It quickly went through no fewer than five editions in as many years—a remarkable number when we consider that it appeared in the first age of print—and since then it has never ceased to engage its readers.

Utopia has also given birth to an idea that is understood far beyond those who have read the book itself: the idea of 'utopianism'. Sometimes used as praise, and sometimes as blame, the assertion of 'utopianism' is an immediately recognisable one. And for all that it is sometimes a dismissive accusation, it is also an accusation that recognises the fundamental merit in a course of action.

Thomas More's *Utopia* has given a great deal of pleasure, too, for it is a genuinely funny book. Its humour has survived both the passing of half a millennium of time, and also translation out of its original Latin into dozens of other modern languages. But *Utopia's* humour is not entirely innocent, for it is also a highly political book, with a vision of social and political life that still has the power to provoke, as well as to delight.

Yet one of the things that *Utopia* has less often been called is 'magnificent'. After all, the buildings in the place it describes are all the same; and the people they house, too, all wear the same kind of clothes. Moreover, even the author himself, as we shall see, tells us at the end of his book that the island he has described is not necessarily noble or majestic. But in speaking to you today about Thomas More's remarkably long-lived book, one of the claims I shall hope to uphold is that the island of Utopia is indeed, in its own way, a genuinely magnificent place.

But let me begin by recalling certain of the more important aspects of More's book. To do this, I want to indulge in an exercise of imaginative historical reconstruction. Let us consider *Utopia* from the perspective of one of its very first readers. How might they have experienced the book?

Let us suppose that you are a reasonably substantial figure in the City of London. Perhaps you are one of the 'married men of business', to whom More's friend John Colet entrusted the oversight of the school that he founded in 1509 in the courtyard of St Paul's Cathedral. As such, you might well be a member of the Mercer's Company, the foremost of the City guilds—and the body which Thomas More himself joined in the same year.

As a merchant and a mercer, then, you are interested in trade, and might have money invested in the passage of goods between the Port of London and Antwerp, or Florence. But you are also intellectually curious, and your horizons stretch beyond the Netherlands and Italy to the Holy Roman Empire of the German-speaking lands. And very recently, you have also begun to hear curious stories about an entirely 'new world' altogether.

More's book *Utopia*, which perhaps you purchased from one of the booksellers' shops in the churchyard of Old St Paul's Cathedral, takes you directly into this new world. This is made clear by its title-page: it is 'A truly golden little book, no less beneficial than entertaining, on the best state of a commonwealth, and on the new island of Utopia.' And its author is your acquaintance Thomas More, known to you as an extremely sharp lawyer in his late thirties, who is already playing an important role in the governance of the City. You may not know that he is going to go on to become Lord Chancellor of England, but he has already impressed you both by his acumen and his wit, as well as by his translations of Lucian and his lectures on St Augustine.

Like many renaissance writings, your modest new volume is divided into two different 'books'. Book 1 is a dialogue between three people. (In a later 1518 edition of the work there is even a picture of these people at the front.) You've heard of two of them. One is Thomas More himself, who is a character in his own work. This again is not entirely unusual in renaissance writings, although in the case of *Utopia* it offers particular opportunities for More to exercise his characteristic irony. The second character in the dialogue is Pieter Gilles, a merchant in Antwerp where, like More, he was an important figure in that city's local government. But you've never heard of the third figure, who is called Raphael Hythloday. Perhaps your son, who is a very good little humanist who has been learning the shiny new language of ancient Greek at St Paul's School, pricks up his ears here, because he tells you that 'Hythloday' sounds a little like a 'distributor of nonsense' (*hythlos daion*) in that language.

Hythloday, it turns out, is a traveller. And in Book 2 of *Utopia* he has a traveller's tale to tell his audience. But it is no ordinary story. He has nothing to say about monstrous Scyllas, or ravenous harpies, or cannibalistic Laestrygonians. As More drily comment, you can find these things everywhere; but there is hardly anywhere that you can find well- and wisely-educated citizens. But this is exactly what Hythloday has to speak about. And he has found them on a new island, called 'Utopia'.

Hythloday travelled to this new island with another real person: Amerigo Vespucci. Christopher Columbus, who never made it beyond the Caribbean, gains the credit for the European discovery of the Americas; but it is

Amerigo Vespucci who has the honour of giving them their name. Vespucci was canny enough to write several books about his travels. This is one of them: the 'New World' (1504). In it, Vespucci described four voyages he'd made to a place that, by rights, ought not to exist.

Here, after all is the world you grew up: the world mapped by the Greek geographer Ptolemy, depicted here in map from 1485. It shows the old world, though in a form very strange to us now. The holy city of Jerusalem is towards the centre, which is not an accident. Africa is present, though there is no Cape of Good Hope. The Arabian peninsula is recognisable. But India is scarcely recognisable, not least because the island of Sri Lanka, or 'Taprobana', as it was then known, dominates that part of the world. Perhaps it is no accident that Hythloday should have returned to Europe via Taprobana.

Yet by 1516 that world was beginning to change. Perhaps you owned this edition of Ptolemy's *Geography*, which had a 'supplement' at the back depicting the 'modern' lands and seas that had been reported 'in our own age'. In it, you would have found this map of a *terra incognita*, an unknown land.

Or perhaps you had been lucky enough to see this extraordinary document: the world-map of Martin Waldseemüller, which now only survives in a single copy owned by the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. It depicts, for the very first time, the entire globe on a single set of printed sheets. Africa now has its Cape (as well as an elephant), but the most notable addition is the vestigial presence of South and North America—the first time they had been given that name.

And to honour its discoverer, the modern Amerigo Vespucci now faces the ancient Claudius Ptolemy in a pair of portraits at the top of the map. It is somewhere on this newly enlarged globe that Utopia is to be found. But where? In an apparently embarrassed letter to Pieter Gilles that serves as a preface to his volume, Thomas More confesses that it never occurred to him to ask 'in what part of the New World Utopia is to be found'. He is a little ashamed (he explains) 'not to know the ocean where this island lies about which I've written so much' (5).

Now, of course, we are comfortable with the thought that it is in the nature of Utopia always to be just beyond the edge of the known world. This is one reason why the genre of science fiction is one of *Utopia's* many heirs. But the thought I would like to emphasise at this point is that when *Utopia* was written it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that travel beyond the confines of the known Ptolemaic world might indeed reveal a civilisation which was indeed superior to the intellectual, social, and political world of Europe. Now, as the boundaries of our knowledge and expectation have shrunk so dramatically, we have to extend our imagination beyond the bounds of planet Earth to imagine such a magnificent possibility.

But what is this new island like? In Book 2 of *Utopia*, Hythloday paints an elaborate picture of this 'new island', which I must now also use words to describe to you. He tells us, to begin with, that it was originally not an island at all: in an unbelievable feat of civil engineering, the island was cut off from its continent by digging a channel no less than fifteen miles wide. The island is therefore a creation of artifice, not of nature: it is a product of the exercise of human will and human power.

This extraordinary endeavour was led by the founder of Utopia, a man called Utopus (41–43). Utopus was the man who gave the new island its laws and customs 1,760 years previously (46). In some translations Utopus is rather inaccurately described as a king, but More's Latin is careful never to accord this title to him. Utopus rather represents the neo-classical figure of the lawgiver, like Lycurgus, who founded the ancient city-state of Sparta, or Solon, the equivalent founder of Athens. Utopus is the founder of a great commonwealth, not merely of a hereditary dynasty.

There are fifty-four cities in Utopia, all of them, says Hythloday without apparent irony, 'exactly the same'. Yet one of them, Amaurot, is at the centre of the island, and it is this one that Hythloday describes. It is surrounded by well-cultivated fields. Its rivers are bridged by fine stone arches. The large houses are all an impressive three stories high, and constructed from brick and cement. They face each other across streets that are no less than twenty feet wide. This is a vast span by comparison with the narrow lanes of sixteenth-century London; the same lanes that helped the Great Fire of exactly 150 years later to burn the wooden buildings of the City of London to the ground. And at the back they have large gardens, which the Utopians love to cultivate, and indeed compete with each other to render more beautiful and fertile (44–47).

Yet all this civic excellence does not come about without effort, and the Utopians are nothing if not industrious. They are remarkable in that every single person contributes their labour to the island. All work in the fields, by rotation. But every person is also taught one of more trade, such as weaving, or metal-work, or carpentry. Moreover, not only men, but also (as Hythloday is at pains to make clear) women too follow the same course of life. Even the magistrates who govern Utopia choose to work, though they don't have to (48–52).

The benefits of this, for More, are clear: because the whole population engages in useful work, they easily produce everything they need—indeed, a surplus of what they need. And the consequence is that the working day is only six hours long (52–53).

Here again there is an extraordinary contrast between Utopia and the European society that More and Hythloday discuss in Book 1. In Europe, the female half the population (says Hythloday) do not work. Then there are all the men who shirk their duties: priests, for instance, and monks; also nobles, and the so-called gentlemen and

retainers who attach themselves to such dignitaries; and sturdy beggars who feign illness as an excuse for idleness. But what is even worse, in Europe, even the work that people do is useless. People waste their energy in superfluous trades, making luxuries that merely satisfy vanity and licentiousness (51).

The Utopians, by contrast, have much better priorities. For them, manual labour is simply a means to an end. Because everyone works, there is more free time for everyone. And in fact, 'the foundation of their commonwealth looks towards this one goal above all: that, so far as public necessities allow, the entirety of the citizens should be free to withdraw as much time as possible from the service of the body, and devote themselves to the freedom and cultivation of the mind. For in that, they think, lies the happiness of life' (53).

As this suggests, the Utopians are remarkably scholarly folk. All children receive an education in 'good letters'—the sort of schooling that Colet founded St Paul's School to provide. A few boys who have shown a special aptitude for study from childhood onwards are excused from working the land and permitted to give themselves over entirely to learning. But throughout their lives, a 'good part' of the population, both men and women, devotes their plentiful spare time to reading (63-64).

And not just reading! For they also like to gain knowledge by the ear as well as the eye, and one of the many remarkable things that Hythloday tells us about these remarkable people is that they love to hear lectures. Not only the scholars who are required to attend them, but also many other people of all kinds, both men and women again, 'flock to hear' public lectures on whatever subject interest them. But I am sorry to say that the Utopians are made of sterner stuff than the denizens of Gresham College: for the Utopian lectures all take place 'in the hours before dawn' (50).

The Utopians value learning for the knowledge it brings them of many useful things. They are excellent physicians, although the natural temperance of the people means that 'there is hardly a country in the world that needs medicine less' (76). They are excellent astronomers. And, remarkably, they are able to turn their deep knowledge of the natural world towards an extraordinary feat: forecasting the weather (65). Unlike the scholars of the renaissance, who had to spend years learning Latin before they could hope to participate in their own world of learning, the Utopians pursue their studies 'in their native tongue' (64). But this is not at all to suggest that they despise ancient languages as useless, for once Hythloday has brought them a parcel of books in Greek they rapidly acquire a deep knowledge of that language, too (75). In all these things, as I hope you may agree, the Utopians are really rather impressive. Magnificently impressive, we might even say.

In truth, in an age before electric light prolonged the day, and when candles were expensive, going to bed early and waking before dawn was not especially uncommon. But there is a different way in which the institutions of Utopia were quite unlike anything like Thomas More's world, or our own. In Utopia, there is 'nothing private anywhere' (46). The doors of the Utopians' houses are open to anyone who wants to enter. The Utopians eat in halls shared between thirty households, where they 'take their meals in common'. Hence in Utopia, where nothing is private, 'everyone eagerly pursues public business' (103). Extraordinarily, it is also a capital offence to enter into private discussions about public affairs. For the Utopians, politics above all is something that has to be done in public, lest their commonwealth fall prey to fatal corruption. But most importantly of all, there is no private property. No one owns anything, and there is no money that could be used to buy things anyway.

It is this above all, that elevates Utopia far beyond any other polity for Raphael Hythloday. 'Where you have private property', he tells More at the end of Book 1, 'and money is the measure of all things, it is hardly ever possible for a commonwealth to be just or prosperous'. The reason that Plato was 'the wisest of men' was that he realised that 'the one and only path to public welfare lies through equal allocation of goods'. Nothing can be fairly and justly distributed, nor can human affairs be happily organised, unless private property is 'entirely abolished' (37-38).

Hence the Utopians use gold and silver for chamber-pots, and to make chains to shackle and decorate those few citizens of their commonwealth who have committed crimes (61). Yet we should not suppose that there are very many of these criminals. This is partly because the Utopians are such well-formed citizens that they need 'very few laws' (82). But there is also a more profound, and logically unarguable reason why crime is rare in Utopia. Hythloday points the more at the end of his description of the island; indeed he becomes quite vehement on the subject. Consider, he says, 'the happiness of the Utopian commonwealth, which has abolished not only money, but with it greed! What a mass of troubles was cut away with that one step! What a thicket of crimes was uprooted! Everyone knows that if money was abolished, fraud, theft, robbery, quarrels, brawls, altercations, seditions, murders, treasons, poisonings, and a whole set of crimes which are avenged but not prevented by the hangman would at once die out'. For Hythloday, by contrast, the 'various states that flourish today' are 'nothing but a conspiracy of the rich, who further their own profit under the name and title of the common good'. There can be no 'justice' where a 'nobleman, a goldsmith, or a banker' who make their living by pursuing useless activities get to live lives of 'luxury and grandeur' while labourers, drivers, or farmers work so hard 'that even beasts of burden would scarcely endure it' (104-5).

It is important that we take the ironies here properly seriously. More set his book in Antwerp, which together with Venice and Florence was one of the greatest commercial cities of the early sixteenth century. His earliest readers, who wrote letters praising the book that were printed with later editions, were largely successful professional men who saw that in enjoying More's book they were also condemning themselves. Indeed, at the end of Book 1 the character of More himself offers a slew of arguments in defence of the absolute necessity of

private property, for encouraging industry and maintaining political authority (38–39). The point is not that we, or our prosperous City Mercer in 1516, might find Hythloday's ideas 'unrealistic': they appeared no less unrealistic at the time. The point is the challenge that they throw down.

Let us therefore turn to consider another aspect of More's challenge to his readers 500 years ago, and to us. Surely such a thoughtful and well-educated people as the Utopians have considered carefully a subject that many writers in the later middle ages and renaissance agreed was the most pressing and noble one of all, and the one with the most important consequences for the happiness or misery of the population: politics. Certainly they have. *Utopia*, after all, is a book that uses a description of an imaginary island to explore the question of what the 'best form of a commonwealth' might take. Here we need to emphasise the contrast that More sets up between Book 1 and Book 2 of his profound yet playful little volume.

Book 1 offers a debate between the different characters over the nature of European politics—the problem posed by thieves in England (15–21); the perils of participating the councils of the King of France (28–34). The world it describes is one, as Hythloday says, of 'miserable poverty and destitution' (20).

Book 2, by contrast, offers us a further portrait of a quite different kind of polity in the form of Utopia. For a start, because they have no money, there can be no theft, and also no need to limit a ruler's wealth. But there are also further striking differences. One notable one is that the cities of Utopia, although they are all similar, are also all independent. They all share the same Utopian values, but they are not subject to a single executive authority (43). They are part of a confederation of city-states—we might even call it a kind of Utopian Union—in which the fruits of their abundance are distributed equally among all the members, especially if one particular city should for any reason fall on hard times. 'Thus', Hythloday explains, 'the whole island is like a single family' (59).

But these are not the most striking differences between the picture Hythloday paints of Utopia and the criminal, violent, and quarrelsome European polities that More, Gillies, and Hythloday debate in Book 1. Those polities are all monarchies: they are all governed by single individuals who have inherited their position and who are guided, however imperfectly, by counsel offered by notables of various different sorts. The cities of Utopia are governed quite differently. There, political office is won by election, not by birth.

The fundamental political unit in Utopia is also its fundamental social unit: the household. In Utopia, as in early sixteenth century London, a household might contain rather more than just the members of a nuclear family: they might contain several generations, and also spouses—hence between ten to sixteen adults (54). Each group of thirty households in turn elects a representative who governs them, known in the Utopian language as a 'Syphogrant'. There are 200 of these Syphogrants in each city, and they sit in a 'popular assembly' (*comitia publica*) or (as we might think of it) a Lower Chamber or House of Congress. They are elected, and changed, annually. Over the Syphogrants there is a higher level of elected officials, known as 'Tranibors'. There are twenty of these, and they sit in the 'senate' of each city. They are re-elected annually but 'are not changed for light or casual reasons'. The highest official in each Utopian city is its governor (in Latin *princeps*). He is also elected, but for life. He is only removed if he 'is suspected of aiming at a tyranny'.

At every level, then, Utopian politics is deliberative. Most decisions appear to be taken by the senate of Tranibors in council with the governor. But the Senate refers matters of 'great moment' to the assembly of Syphogrants, who after they have 'consulted' with the households that elected them, send back their own counsel to the Senate. Finally, representatives from each city also sometimes meet in council together in Amaurot, to discuss matters that affect the entire island of Utopia.

We might ask what these political arrangements look like in the context of those in contemporary Europe. Though most polities in renaissance Europe were ruled by hereditary princes, elective offices were widely available at a more local level. In particular, the government of cities was often conducted by elected officials. The City of London, for instance, was governed by a Common Council of a hundred or so wealthy householders, which in turn was subject to the Aldermen and Mayor. There are some sly jokes in Utopia that serve to compare Amaurot with London, and its river, the Anyder, with the River Thames.

We might also wonder whether Utopian political arrangements do not look a little like those of England more generally. After all, there is an upper and a lower chamber, and a single executive figure. But in other respects Utopia is a world away from the political structure of early sixteenth century England. There, a hereditary monarch governed by means of legislation passed by a House of Commons and a hereditary House of Lords. (Although there were elections to the Commons in this period they were much less often contested. And there was no sense that Members should only serve a limited term before rotating out of office.)

In Utopia, by contrast, there is no king. Nor is there a hereditary aristocracy. And there could hardly be: for hereditary office is a possession, and in Utopia no one owns anything. By virtue of its fundamental law of community of goods, therefore, Utopia is also by necessity a republic. Election, not inheritance, is the principal mechanism by which political power is acquired. But this brings up another aspect of Utopian politics, which is so obvious that I hardly need to mention it: in Utopia, 'any man who campaigns for public office is disqualified for all of them' (82).

Yet although their elections have popular elements, Utopia is very far from that great invention of the nineteenth century, representative democracy. To be sure, households elect their local representative. But they do not elect

the Governor, who instead is chosen by those local representatives. Nor—it seems, although More's text is slightly vague on the matter—do they elect the Tranibors. In short, Utopia has a system of political representation that looks to me most like ideas that came to the fore only in the high Enlightenment of the later eighteenth century. Thus the Utopian system is a little reminiscent of what after the French Revolution of 1789 was called 'graduated promotion', whereby high political office was only available to those who had served in a lower capacity first. Alternatively, perhaps we might regard the Utopian system of representation as being a little like the Electoral College system designed by the framers of the American Constitution in 1787. In the view of the wise founders of that great republic, it was not appropriate for the people to choose their President directly. Instead they laid down that the people should elect trusted delegates, who would meet together in their respective states and by majority vote choose two persons who, in their view, were fit to fill the high offices of President and Vice-President.

But of course it is rather unhistorical to try to understand a book published in 1516 with reference to the politics of 250 years later. It may be even more revealing to consider it in the light of the civic politics of renaissance Europe. One comparison in particular has often struck readers of *Utopia*. Does not this imaginary island, which was created by human agency, sound a little like that great peaceful, yet commercial and imperial island republic of Venice? Like Utopia, renaissance Venice was governed by a Senate, from whose members was chosen a governor, a Duke or 'Doge', who held office for life, but who could not bequeath that office to his heirs.

Utopia is like Venice in other ways, too. By the early sixteenth century the myth was beginning to be formed that the Venetian republic was unconquerable, yet pacific, and therefore potentially eternal. One of the qualities that Hythloday ascribes to Utopia, as well, is that it is so harmonious internally, and so mighty externally, that it is likely to last for ever. Venice's panegyrists even liked to claim that the island republic was superior to Plato's Republic itself. Both Hythloday and his hearers and readers were quick to compare Utopia positively to Plato's Republic as well. Truly, Venice is a magnificent place with which to compare the Utopian commonwealth.

Yet we must also emphasise how different Utopia is from Venice in other respects. Here again, money and inheritance come to the fore. The Venetian republic, notoriously, was highly oligarchical in nature. If the name of your family had not been inscribed in the Golden Book of nobility you could not hope to participate in the Grand Council or be elected Doge. Moreover, Venice owed its political greatness above to the wealth it earned from its trade. The Utopians, by contrast, have no hereditary political offices, and scorn trade as the pursuit of a false good. If Utopia is magnificent, it is not magnificent because of its gold.

In the literature on Thomas More the comparison with Venice is reasonably well-established. Recently, however, I have come to wonder whether there is not also a different kind of city with which the cities of Utopia should be compared. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries some of the grandest, richest and most politically sophisticated cities of Europe were the so-called 'Free Imperial Cities' of the Holy Roman Empire—city-states such as Strasbourg, Nuremberg, or Basel. Like the Italian city-republics of Venice and Florence, these cities too attracted a literature of praise to themselves. Cities like Nuremberg were some of the most magnificent urban spaces known to Thomas More's European world. The cities of Utopia bear comparison with them, too.

This comparison was clear to a man called Claude de Chansonette (a German-speaker despite his name) who made the first translation of Utopia into a modern European language. His rendering of Book 2, only, of Thomas More's book was published in 1524 in the Free Imperial City of Basel, with a dedication to its principal elected official the mayor of the city. The title-page of Chansonette's volume states that it was printed in the 'praiseworthy' (*löblichen*) state of Basel, and in his preface Chansonette makes it clear that he regards Utopia, too, as a similarly praiseworthy place.

These comparisons are important if we are to try to understand the various different historical materials out of which More wove his immortal fable. Vespucci's *New World*, Plato's *Republic*, Venetian splendour, and the Free Cities of the Holy Roman Empire all contributed elements towards his vision. But we must also recognise the extraordinary originality of More's 500-year old book. The Utopian polity he described was remarkable and unique when he wrote it, and it still offers challenges today. I would go so far as to say that Utopia is the most thoroughly democratic polity that had ever been conceived in renaissance Europe. The idea that individual households might be involved in taking political decisions that affected an entire polity would have struck most early sixteenth century readers as another one of Utopia's obvious absurdities.

Clearly, then, Thomas More did not share the view of the great Roman moralist Cicero, whose authoritative views were so important in shaping the moral and political thought of his age. Cicero had suggested that the common people lacked the ability to offer sound advice; the Utopians beg to differ.

But Utopia is not only democratic in nature. It also involves elements of government by a few people (the Tranibors) and by a single person (the governor). According to the variant on the neo-classical analysis of political structure that was so widespread in the middle ages and renaissance, Utopia is therefore clearly an instance of a magnificently 'well-mixed' constitution, which contains democratic, aristocratic, and monarchical elements in perfect balance—just as a whole range of earlier political writers, including Polybius, Cicero, and Thomas Aquinas had emphasised.

I have therefore offered you an account of More's *Utopia* which stresses its magnificence. But our story is not quite as straightforward as this suggests. For quite a few of *Utopia's* readers have not found the island a

'magnificent' place. They worry that it is a place of conformity, of suppressed individuality, of misplaced simplicity. Remarkably, some readers have even thought that More's book offers nothing less than a case study in disguised tyranny.

Moreover, at the end of his work even the character of Thomas More himself objects that Utopia may not in fact be very magnificent. His doubt comes at the close of Book 2, after Raphael Hythloday has finished his insistent panegyric upon Utopia and the justice that it alone embodies. More objects 'to the principal foundation of their whole society, their communal life, pursued without any exchange of money. This one thing completely overturns all nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty, which (according to public opinion) are the true honours and ornaments of a Commonwealth' (106-7).

Is Utopia ultimately then a magnificent place? Despite More's ironic and rather guarded object to his own creation, I think that there is evidence that we are to suppose it is. Utopia is, after all, magnificently populous and well-built. It houses all of its very numerous inhabitants in buildings that were larger and more commodious than anything that early sixteenth century cities, and even the City of London, had to offer. Hythloday indeed even tells us at the beginning of Book 2 that Utopia's cities are all 'spacious and magnificent' (43). We might add that, although I have not had time to go into these matters, that the Utopians' churches are of a magnificent size, and that the Utopian people (and the mercenaries whom they engage to fight most of their battles for them) are also magnificently successful in warfare against their many enemies. And for this reason, too, their polity has lasted a magnificently long time.

Of course, as More's doubt identifies, the Utopians are not magnificent in more conventional ways. Their rulers do not distinguish themselves by luxurious clothes or golden chains of office. Nor do they inhabit magnificent palaces from which their subjects are excluded but have to pay to maintain.

But there is one last way in which, I suggest, More presents Utopia to us as indeed a magnificent place: it is magnificently just. No money is required there to obtain justice from the laws (not least because there are, of course, no lawyers). No one needs to be rich to exercise political office. There, and there alone (as Hythloday says), 'virtue has its reward' (37).

A question that *Utopia* often raises for its readers, as this lecture has perhaps raised for you, is the question of practicability: could the arrangements of this best commonwealth ever be realised? The answer to this question is surely that they are no more possible now than they were in 1516. But that may not be the point. Perhaps, as the character of 'Thomas More' himself puts it in Book 1, what Utopia offers us is not a blueprint, but a magnificent destination that we might aim for even as we know it will never be attained. As More says to Hythloday, when Hythloday proclaims that he could have nothing to offer the councils of kings: 'Don't give up the ship in a storm because you can't hold back the winds! ... what you can't turn to good, at least try to make a little bad as possible.' That, in the end, is not a merely Utopian conclusion.

And so I end by proposing one last way in which Thomas More's 500-year old work is magnificent. Though the renaissance world from which it arose has largely passed away, *Utopia* remains to this day a magnificently thought-provoking book.

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Some further reading

Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. and trans. by George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams, revised edn (Cambridge, 2002). [Page references in the text of this lecture are to this edition, although I have sometimes modified the translations offered there to reflect my own sense of More's original Latin.]

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