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Rethinking Medieval Renaissance Literature

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### Thomas More's "Utopia"

Throughout history, humans have envisioned a "perfect place" in forms of art, literature, and song. Whether or not this utopian society is possible has often been subject to debate. Talk of Utopia has raised questions of human behavior, whether we are capable of conducting such a society, plus additional matters of how to completely restructure our present society into one that benefits everyone. The possibility of a utopia comes down to what exactly consists of the ideal paradise. Paradise should be a benefit to every person who lives there. Whether or not a utopian society is possible ultimately depends on how we envision its position in our world, and how it can benefit every subject, no matter their status.

A popular portrayal of Utopia is Thomas More's novel *Utopia*, which amassed quite a following for the unique ideas he put to work in his writing. These ideas were quite a forward for the time in which it was published. "Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) was an English writer and philosopher who wrote the book *Utopia*, which coined the term. The text is an interesting approach to utopian philosophy. On the one hand, More puts forward a number of carefully considered ideas for how to create a more ideal society: in his utopia, people share common property, they work together, they have few class distinctions, they rarely go to war, they practice religious tolerance, they benefit from excellent education, and they have few instances of crime" (Study). Part of what is so alluring about a utopian society is the aspect of peace. In

Thomas More's utopian society, the crime rate is low, and it seems like everyone is treated equally and presented with the same opportunities. Who wouldn't dream of a place where war is rarely fought, and each person no matter his station can benefit from a rewarding education? "In Utopia the narrator, who bears the name of the author, records a story that is told to him by Raphael Hythlodæus... about his journey to an island off the Brazilian coast, where he found a sort of welfare state providing every member of the community with the necessary food, clothing, housing, education, and medical treatment. It is a society characterized by a communal way of life without money" (JSTOR). Part of what is so unique about More's fantasy society is the total and complete lack of money. Perhaps we are to understand that money can be a cause for disruption in the natural human life. It turns people selfish perhaps. Or does it? The novel arose quite a bit of controversy during its time. "More's Utopia describes a pagan and communist city-state in which the institutions and policies are entirely governed by reason. The order and dignity of such a state provided a notable contrast with the unreasonable polity of Christian Europe, divided by self-interest and greed for power and riches, which More described in Book I, written in England in 1516. The description of Utopia is put in the mouth of a mysterious traveler, Raphael Hythloday, in support of his argument that communism is the only cure against egoism in private and public life" (Marc'Hadour). More's novel evokes a multitude of communist philosophy applied to his idealized society. But what we are to understand about this is that "egoism" is overall corruptive of what would otherwise be considered current life. In other words, eliminating greed would be a strong premise to More's utopia. "Through dialogue More speaks in favor of the mitigation of evil rather than its cure, human nature being fallible. Among the topics discussed by More in Utopia were penology, state-controlled education, religious pluralism, divorce, euthanasia, and women's rights. The resulting demonstration of his learning,

invention, and wit established his reputation as one of the foremost humanists. Soon translated into most European languages, Utopia became the ancestor of a new literary genre, the utopian romance” (Marc’Hadour). What we are to understand about More’s *Utopia* is that such forward thinking could have been taken more as a suggestion for what future societies could see room for improvement rather than reconstructing the way of life completely. More’s novel evoked questions about how society could be improved. However, this is not to say that all of his ideas were suitable to be put into practice.

Several depictions of utopias are still flawed. It would seem that even in removing unwanted parts of fantasy society, those societies somehow always still have challenges. “Genocide has always been there in these otherworldly narratives: in Gulliver’s Travels, the Houyhnhnms wanted to wipe out the Yahoos; Gerrard Winstanley, founder of the True Levellers, recommended the execution of all lawyers. There are few utopias that don’t blithely eradicate unwanted elements, and while sometimes the author’s sympathies are clear, others have satirical immunity, presenting their fiction not as a window on to a better future, but as a mirror held up to bleak humanity. It was often hard to tell whether the fiction was an aspiration or a warning” (Jones). This notion that any fictional construction of a utopia is meant to be more of a mirror held up to the harshness of humanity is necessary to consider when approaching utopian ideas. Perhaps ideas of a utopian society are simply only ethical when we reflect on them. Even with the delights of a perfect utopian society, Thomas More’s *Utopia* still has qualities of a less-than-desirable civilization. “On the other hand, having coined the term, he is aware that he is describing both an ideal place and 'no place.' He also introduces certain ideas that are not as palatable to contemporary audiences: his utopian government still enforces slavery. This is one of the things that is often interesting about utopias: even societies purported to be perfect still

often end up with significant flaws” (Study). The flaws in Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the society he quite literally fashioned to exemplify the ideal perfect place only suggests that these perfect places may simply be impossible. Maybe a utopia is not meant to exist anywhere. Even Thomas More’s utopia has flaws. Perhaps this was overall intended to make us reflect on ourselves and our own society where there is room for improvement.

The overarching question of whether a utopia can exist remains unanswered. “What is utopia from an etymological standpoint? While the standard utopian society definition refers to a perfect place, the word "utopia" actually comes from the Greek *ou* meaning "not" and *topos* meaning "place." A utopia is at once a perfect place and "no place." This etymological root is important when considering utopian philosophy and literature: utopias do not really exist, though discussing them does provide both an aspirational goal for society and a vehicle to criticize how current societies work” (Study). Perhaps we are not meant to find a utopia anywhere. Whether the perfect place does truly exist may simply depend on the wants of each person. Everything, in all regards, should be reflected upon for improvement to better serve mankind, the earth, and the future of humanity. Was the utopia of Thomas More meant to be taken literally, or simply as a novel full of questions about what was possible for More’s society? The possibility of a utopia comes down to what exactly consists of the ideal paradise. But perhaps we were never meant to travel to a world beyond this one in search of that paradise. Maybe all we will ever need is right here.

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