

# SIR THOMAS MORE: SCHOLAR, STATESMAN AND SAINT

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Thomas More was a scholar, humanist, statesman and martyr who reflected the turbulent times of Tudor England in his essential work, *Utopia*. A scholar of Latin and Greek, a friend of humanists including Erasmus, a biographer of Pico della Mirandola and King Richard III of England, Sir Thomas More was also a devout Catholic who was ultimately martyred for his faith. In *Utopia*, he synthesized ideas and themes from Plato, St Augustine and Pico della Mirandola together with his own wit, humor and visions of Tudor England to create a society that has since been analyzed as both utopia and dystopia. As Richard Sylvester wrote: "Utopia? Excuse me, I thought it was hell."<sup>1</sup>

Thomas More was born in February 1478, the only surviving son of Sir John More a prominent barrister and judge. As a child More was educated in Latin at St Anthony's School in London, and at age thirteen joined the household of Cardinal Morton, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England<sup>2</sup>. It was Morton who first recognized the potential in More, and, according to More's son-in-law William Roper, declared "This child [...] will prove a marvellous man."<sup>3</sup> In 1492, Morton arranged for More to study at Oxford under the tutelage of the prominent English humanists William Grocyn and Thomas Linacre. The latter remained friends with More until their deaths in 1519 and 1520 respectively.

After two years in Oxford, More returned to London to study law in the Inns of Court, where he was admitted in 1496 and became a barrister in 1501<sup>4</sup>. It was

during this period that he met Desiderius Erasmus and formed a deep friendship with the noted humanist. It was while staying in More's house in London in 1509 that Erasmus wrote his *Encomium Moriae* or *Praise of Folly*, which Erasmus dedicated to More. As well as practicing law, More also continued his scholarship. He studied and wrote a great deal about Pico della Mirandola, and gave a lecture on Augustine's *De civitate Dei* in the Church of St Lawrence Jewry<sup>5</sup>. Both were to prove influential upon More's *Utopia*.

Thomas More was a complex man. He was a devoted Catholic, and at one point struggled over whether or not to join the Church. He spent time with the monks of the London Charterhouse in their devotions and pondered joining either the Carthusians or the Observant Franciscans<sup>6</sup>. However, he ultimately decided to forgo the rigors of the priesthood, and as Erasmus writes, decided "to be a chaste husband rather than an impure priest."<sup>7</sup> He was to remain deeply pious throughout his entire life. He wore a hair shirt until the day before his death, was known to flagellate himself and demanded piety and learning from all those in his family. However, according to his friend Erasmus, as well as being temperate and pious, he also had a vivid sense of humor and a pleasant manner. In a letter in 1519, asked about More, Erasmus wrote "His countenance is in harmony with his character, being always expressive of an amiable joyousness, and even an incipient laughter, and, to speak candidly, it is better framed for gladness than for gravity and dignity, though without any approach to folly or buffoonery. [...] In society he is so polite, so sweet-mannered, that no one is of so melancholy a disposition as not to be cheered by him, and there is no misfortune that he does not alleviate.

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June 2002, <http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/morebio.htm>), para 2.

<sup>5</sup> Hudleston, "More", para 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, para 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, para 4.

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<sup>1</sup> Marius, Richard, "Utopia as Mirror for Life and Times," Keynote Address, Loyola College of Baltimore, (2 March 1995. Reproduced in *Early Modern Literary Studies*), para 68.

<sup>2</sup> Hudleston, G. Roger, "St Thomas More," *Catholic Encyclopedia*. (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14689c.htm>).

<sup>3</sup> Roper, William, "The Life of Sir Thomas More," Reproduced in Halsall, Paul, ed, *The Modern History Sourcebook*, (Fordham University, February 2001, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook.html>).

<sup>4</sup> Jokinen, Anniina, "The Life of Sir Thomas More (1478-1535)," *Luminarium 16<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissance English Literature*. (11

“Since his boyhood he has so delighted in merriment, that it seems to be part of his nature [...] In human affairs there is nothing from which he does not extract enjoyment, even from things that are most serious. If he converses with the learned and judicious, he delights in their talent; if with the ignorant and foolish, he enjoys their stupidity.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1501, More entered politics, becoming a Member of Parliament. It was here that he first came into conflict with an English King. More managed to reduce a large grant of money to Henry VII, and in return, Henry had More’s father imprisoned until More paid a one hundred pound fine<sup>9</sup>. After Henry VII’s death, however, More was able to progress. He was established as a lawyer, became Under-Sheriff of London in 1510, and took part in embassies, including one to Flanders in 1515, and in 1520, was present at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in King Henry VIII’s tent. It was while in Flanders that he began his first draft of his most important work, *Utopia*<sup>10</sup>.

Thomas More’s *Utopia*, published in Louvain in 1516, is a description of an imaginary island between Europe and the Americas called Utopia<sup>11</sup>. Discovered by the mythical explorer Raphael Hythlodaye or Nonsensus – the nature of Utopia is related in a Platonic dialogue between Raphael, More and other real figures. Clearly More was influenced by his interest in Pico della Mirandola’s studies of Plato and the immortality of the soul, and there are elements of Plato’s *Republic* in this work<sup>12</sup>. Not only is the dialogue itself in Platonic form – a possible attempt to create a level of deniability<sup>13</sup> – but its theme reflects that of Plato’s *Republic* and several aspects of Utopia reflect Plato’s idealized government including levels of egalitarianism and an emphasis upon education<sup>14</sup>. However, there are significant changes, in particular in concepts of class and religion. The two authors were also

writing for different reasons: Plato was writing a philosophy; More was writing to comment on English society, infusing his work with satire and humor.<sup>15</sup> Richard Marius argues that *Utopia* is also strongly influenced by Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* as it assumes Augustine’s pessimism about human nature.<sup>16</sup> This belief in human depravity infuses *Utopia*, making privacy a danger to the state<sup>17</sup>, and a detachment from emotion and affection to be desired<sup>18</sup>.

Religion in *Utopia* retains a very Christian feel and has an important rôle in Utopian society, yet has some significant differences from the European world of Thomas More. Utopians may have a variety of religions, yet most acknowledge the primacy of a single creator God, the immortality of the soul and that the soul will be rewarded or punished after death. When Raphael Nonsenso introduces the Utopians to Christianity, many accept it willingly. Those that are not monotheists and believers in the immortality of the soul are regarded as “utterly contemptible” and denied public office, yet there is an institutionalized tolerance of the variety of religions extending to a ban on proselytizing. This toleration was utterly at odds with the temper of the times in Europe. More argues that people will ultimately listen to quiet reason whereas if force is attempted, they will resist more strongly. This practical attitude to religion is similar to Macchiavelli’s practical attitude to politics and power: better to persuade people over time and succeed, than to push ideology in an attempt to convert immediately and fail. Later More must have wished that Henry’s England could be so tolerant.

Thomas More initially did extremely well under Henry VIII’s reign. He aided Henry to write his *Defence of the Seven Sacraments* that argued strongly against Luther and resigned as Under-Sheriff in 1519 to become completely part of Henry’s court<sup>19</sup>. He was knighted and received plentiful land from the Crown in 1521; in 1523 he

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<sup>8</sup> Erasmus, Desiderius, “Description of Thomas More,” *The Life and Writings of the Blessed Thomas More* by Father T.E. Bridgett (1913).

<sup>9</sup> Hudleston, “More,” para 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, para 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, para 14.

<sup>12</sup> Poretzky, H.S., “A Kinder Gentler Republic: The Effects of Plato’s Republic on Thomas More’s *Utopia*,” para 1.

<sup>13</sup> Marius, “*Utopia* as Mirror,” para 14.

<sup>14</sup> Poretzky, “Kinder, Gentler,” paras 6–10.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, para 4.

<sup>16</sup> Marius, “*Utopia*,” para 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, para 31.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>19</sup> Jokinen, “More,” para 6.

became Speaker of the House of Commons; in 1525, he became High Steward of the University of Cambridge and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster<sup>20</sup>. Ultimately, in 1529, he succeeded Cardinal Wolsey as the Lord Chancellor of England, the first layman to hold the position<sup>21</sup>. As Chancellor, he rigorously persecuted the Protestants in England and wrote many tracts against the proponents of the new faith. However, More realized that his position rested on the good favor of the King. William Roper reports him as saying “If my head should win him a castle in France, it should not fail to go.”<sup>22</sup> This was to prove prophetic.

Henry VIII had become obsessed with the question of the succession. He was desperate for a son, and his wife Katharine of Aragon had repeatedly failed to supply him with one, bearing only their daughter Mary. Henry decided he needed to divorce Katharine and remarry a younger woman, and set his eye upon a young woman, Anne Boleyn. He petitioned the Vatican for a divorce citing Katharine’s earlier marriage to his brother Arthur as cause. However, Katharine was the sister of the Spanish King who had a vast influence on the Pope, and under this influence, the Pope stubbornly refused the divorce. Henry was infuriated: his succession was in danger because of external religious and secular forces. In 1529, Henry had a royal proclamation issued that declared him “Supreme Head” of the Church. More tried to resign as Chancellor and although his resignation was not accepted, his fall was now inevitable<sup>23</sup>. More was dedicated to the Catholic Church and strongly objected to the divorce. His resignation as Chancellor was accepted in 1532<sup>24</sup> and when Henry declared his divorce from Katharine and married Anne Boleyn in 1533, More refused to attend Anne’s coronation as Queen.<sup>25</sup>

More had hoped to retire in peace, but this would not be possible in the climate in England. Henry had Parliament pass the Act of Succession in 1534 that would

confirm his and Anne’s children as his heirs, and in the same year demanded that More swear the Oath of Supremacy under which More would have to acknowledge that,

“...the king, our sovereign lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realm, shall be taken, accepted, and reputed the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England...”<sup>26</sup>

More could not take the oath. He was still resolutely opposed to the divorce and to Henry’s actions, and while More considered himself a loyal subject of the King, he was more loyal to the Catholic Church and the supremacy of the Pope. In 1534, he was arrested, committed to the Tower of London and arraigned on charges of treason<sup>27</sup>. Peter Ackroyd argues that at his trial in June of that year, the result was a foregone conclusion. Even though More argued skillfully using his full powers as a lawyer, his continued refusal to swear the Oath and thus to betray his conscience – declaring “in thinges touching conscience, euery true and good subject is more bounde to haue respect to his saide conscience and to his soule that to any other thing in the world beside”<sup>28</sup> – together with the reluctance of the jury to leave themselves open to imprisonment themselves, led to his conviction.

Sir Thomas More was executed by beheading six days later on Tower Hill, within a mile of his birthplace. According to Roper – albeit not an unbiased witness – More showed great grace, courage and humor to the end. He agreed readily to the King’s demand that he not speak much on the scaffold, reputedly asking only the crowd to pray for him and asking the executioner to strike well<sup>29</sup>. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* describing More’s death states that “certainly no martyr ever surpassed him in fortitude.”<sup>30</sup> Always considered a martyr by the Catholic Church, he was beatified in 1898 and canonized in 1935. In 2000,

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<sup>20</sup> Hudleston, “More,” para 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, para 9.

<sup>22</sup> Roper, “More”

<sup>23</sup> Hudleston, “More,” para 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, para 10.

<sup>25</sup> Jokinen, “More,” para 7.

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<sup>26</sup> “Henry VIII’s Act of Supremacy (1534)”. *Britain Express*. (<http://www.britainexpress.com/History/tudor/supremacy-henry-text.htm>).

<sup>27</sup> Jokinen, “More,” para 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ackroyd, Peter, *The Life of Thomas More*, (New York: Doubleday, 1998)

<sup>29</sup> Roper, “More,” section IV.

<sup>30</sup> Hudleston, “More,” para 12.

Pope John Paul II declared Saint Thomas More the Patron of Statesmen and Politicians, citing his “constant fidelity to legitimate authority [...] to serve not power but the supreme ideal of justice.”<sup>31</sup>

Thomas More was one of the most important humanist scholars of the age and, with *Utopia*, contributed a legacy that has influenced scholars and thinkers to this day. In addition, he was an accomplished lawyer, devout yet witty man and accomplished statesman. He rose to power under a fickle king and suffered the consequences of following his conscience in a period when practicality and power were becoming the defining motifs of the age.

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<sup>31</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter Proclaiming Saint Thomas More Patron of Statesmen and Politicians,” 31st October 2000.

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