

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



More, Thomas. Utopia

Robert Appelbaum

Volume 33, Number 4, Fall 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106441ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v33i4.15980>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CRRS, Victoria University

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Appelbaum, R. (2010). Review of [More, Thomas. Utopia]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 33(4), 130–133.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v33i4.15980>

More, Thomas. *Utopia*. Norton Critical Editions, 3rd ed. Ed. and rev. George M. Logan. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. Pp. xv, 316. ISBN 978-0-393-93246-1 (paperback) n.p.

The trickiest task for any translator of *Utopia* may come at the very end:

Intera quemadmodum haud possum omnibus assentiri quae dicta sunt, aloqui ab homine citra controversiam eruditissimo simul et rerum humanarum peritissimo, ita facil confiteor permulta esse in Vtopiensium republica, quae in nostris ciuitatis optarim uerius, quam sperarim.

The words are recounted in the voice of Thomas More himself, or at least a fictionalised version of Thomas More, the narrator of *Utopia* as well as one of its interlocutors. What is More actually saying? What is his attitude toward the island of Utopia and the arguments that Hythoday has put forward on its behalf? The first English translation, by Ralph Robynson (1551), solves the problem elegantly:

In the meane time, as I can not agree and consent to all thinges that he said, being els without dowte a man singulerly well learned, and also in all wordely matters exactly and profoundly experienced, so must I nedes confesse and graunt that many thinges be in the vtopian weal publique, which in our cities I may rather wisshe for then hoope after.

When Robynson is faced with a word in Latin which has two equally plausible English meanings, he uses both: *assentiri* becomes ‘agree and consent’; *confiteor* becomes ‘confess and grant’. Meanwhile, the extremely important tag line, *optarim uerius, quam sperarim*, becomes the concise ‘I may rather wish for than hope after’. Wish or hope, *optare* or *sperare*: the meaning of the opposition between the two modes of expectation are clear in the original, and clear enough in Robynson’s English. But what about the qualifier *uerius*, in light of the optative or ‘potential’ subjunctive in which the Latin casts wishing and hoping? ‘I may rather’, says Robynson. In the end, according to Robinson, although the opposition between that which may be ‘wished for’ and that which

may be 'hoped after' is clear (the 'after' providing a connotation of hankering, of moving forwards in one's yearning), the choice between the two is inevitably ambiguous, just as, for Robynson, the partly grammatical and partly semantic notion of *potentiality* is ambiguous.

The previous Norton Critical Edition of *Utopia* was produced by the late Robert M. Adams, in consultation with his friend and colleague, George M. Logan. The first edition appeared in 1975, the second in 1991. And how did Adams, in his second edition, address the problem of the closing lines of *Utopia*? He addresses the problem by nullifying it. Adams wills away the ambiguity of the original.

Meanwhile, though he is a man of unquestioned learning, and highly experienced in the ways of the world, I cannot agree with everything he said. Yet I confess there are many things in the Commonwealth of Utopia that I wish our own country would imitate—though I don't really expect it will.

'Wish or hope' gets replaced with 'wish or expect'. And the result is two-fold. In the first place the opposition is made clarified and rigidified. In the second place, the fictional Thomas is made to conclude his narrative with an expression of anticipated, world-weary frustration. It is hard not to hear in this rendition not only a dubious interpretation of the state-of-mind of Thomas More in 1516, but also the confession of an American liberal, writing after the disappointments of the 1960s, concerned with the apparent impossibility of radical social reform 'in our country'.

The newest Norton Critical Edition is, according to its editor, an 'update' of the previous editions. Logan's desire was to retain as much of the previous editions as possible, including Adams's translation; but his desire was also, he hesitantly admits, to correct Adams's work. For Adams was 'distinctly a translator who was willing to sacrifice the letter of the text to his conception of its spirit', and Logan has 'emended' the text 'in those places where the 1992 version either omits something or is not simply free but actually misrepresents what More chose to write' (xi).

How then does Logan handle the ending of *Utopia*? He improves upon Adams, it seems to me, but also fails to deal with the problem of optative potentiality:

Meanwhile, though he is a man of unquestionable learning, and highly experienced in the ways of the world, I cannot agree with everything he said. Yet I freely confess there are very many things in the Utopian commonwealth that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see.

Logan has thankfully taken away Adams's 'our own country' ('our own societies' is much better, although 'societies' suppresses the political meaning of the original *in nostris ciuitatis*) and, even more important, 'imitate'. But *uerius* ends up modifying 'confess'; the potential of hope is still an expression of anticipated frustration; and the reason why one would 'freely confess' to what is still rendered as anticipated frustration is altogether unclear.

Logan's Third Edition is in this as in many other things a fine advancement over the Second Edition and yet also a disappointment. While Logan has undoubtedly improved upon Adams's tendency to obviate ambiguity in the interest of 'spirit', he shares with Adams an ambivalence about the power of the utopian project, or even the ambiguous power of More's intentionally ambiguous mythopoesis. This edition leaves the Background material largely untouched. Excerpts from Plato, Ovid, the Acts of the Apostles, Amerigo Vespucci and others are all still there. It expands the criticism section, restoring the important early work of Karl Kautsky and Frederic Seebohm on *Utopia* from the First Edition, retaining such crucial items as excerpts from Northrop Frye's 'Varieties of Literary Utopias' and Elizabeth McCutcheon's 'Denying the Contrary', and adding relatively recent material by Alistair Fox, Dominic Baker-Smith and Eric Nelson. It has also gratefully removed the excerpt from B.F. Skinner's silly *Walden Two* and replaced it with an excerpt from the more vigorous (but also dated) work by Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*.

Logan's edition, however, is untouched by structuralist, post-structuralist and post-colonial criticism, not to mention any work motivated by inconveniently political considerations. The only Marxist to appear in the book is Karl Kautsky (1854–1938). And this omission of recent critical trends is not only a very loud silence. It is not only an insistence that the only pre-packaged version of *Utopia* for our undergraduates (as far as Norton is concerned) shall be a liberal humanist version. It is also a refusal to put forward the idea that the reading of *Utopia* today may have anything to tell us about our current condition, or at the very least current intellectual concerns. What would students make of

Louis Marin's post-structuralist, post-Marxist claim, for example, that *Utopia* represents an 'ideological critique of ideology'? What would they make of the very prevalent idea since the collapse of the Berlin Wall that we are now in an era of 'the End of Utopia'? What would they make of the currently widespread claim that *Utopia* represents not only the first modern document of social democracy, but also the first modern English document of the discourse (and ideology) of colonialism? Not only are there no excerpts from any thinkers who might have put forward such ideas as ideology, the End of Utopia, or the discourse of colonialism; there are no citations for 'Further Reading' of any texts that allude to these ideas.

In the end, this new edition is not so new at all. For above all, this is an edition that allows for the frustrated expectations of the past, but not, in any sense, however problematically, however merely optative, for hope in the future.

ROBERT APPELBAUM, *Uppsala University*

Najemy, John M. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xvii, 282. ISBN: 978-0-521-67846-9 (paperback) \$29.99.

"Like all thinkers, he belonged to his time; but like very few he is timeless and universal" (13). John Najemy's concluding remarks in the introductory section of *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli* accurately capture the essence of this compendium: to trace, contextualize, and understand both the active and intellectual planes of one of the most influential—and yet often bastardized—authors in the history of western of political thought. Indeed, the extent and diversity of the sixteen chapters of this volume faithfully represent Najemy's cautious observation about transforming Machiavelli into a "prophet" or a "harbinger of modernity" (8). In other words, what all the authors in this volume share is their interest in avoiding what Gennaro Sasso has referred to as the "invenzione del filosofo-interprete" (1967, 9). That is, they all highlight the importance of historical and philological grounding of texts so as to avoid an