

Renaissance and Reformation

Renaissance et Réforme



Introduction: “Utopia for 500 Years”

Brent Nelson

Volume 41, numéro 3, été 2018

Utopia for 500 Years

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085685ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i3.31533>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Nelson, B. (2018). Introduction: “Utopia for 500 Years”. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(3), 7–15.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i3.31533>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2018

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Introduction: “Utopia for 500 Years”

BRENT NELSON

University of Saskatchewan

In hunting down sources in my own university library on the subject of Thomas More’s *Utopia*, I found myself exercised, traversing floors and stacks from one corner of the building to the other, from HX to PR with a diversion into the B section (following the Library of Congress cataloguing system).¹ It was not a fault of indecision or inconsistency in my university librarians, but a function of a work and an idea that have no clear ownership. In HX, one encounters a disciplinary sub-world, located in the social sciences, nodding toward political studies, cultural studies, and philosophy. As one enters this domain, the literary *Utopia* all but disappears and “Utopian Studies” takes form around rather different poles of influence. My sampling of the first few selections at the start of this shelf is revealing: some of their indexes indicate a few glancing references to the work whose title lent their generating idea; some offered none at all. Such books as *Anarchism and Utopianism* (2009) and *Utopian Lights: The Evolution of the Idea of Social Progress* (1989) manage to name *Utopia* in passing and point in their indexes to a solitary mention of More; across the page, one finds a handful of references to Marx and Marxism, among a plethora of other late-comers to the idea.² Utopia as an idea has taken on a life entirely of its own. With nary a glance at More or his work, settling for “utopian” as a “field of study,” a scholarly book titled *Everyday Utopias* examines various sites of enacted, rather than merely imagined, utopias—while never referencing (and barely alluding to) the long tradition of interpretation of More’s work. Perhaps Utopia is so infused in our culture that it doesn’t need to

1. A search in the large academic literature databases is equally dizzying. At the time of writing, a search of titles and subjects in scholarly literature in EBSCO’s academic search primer returned 4,782 hits for “utopia*” across these and many more disciplines. The same search in the MLA Bibliography returned 1,468.

2. Laurence Davis and Ruth Kinna, ed., *Anarchism and Utopianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009) and Bronisław Baczko, *Utopian Lights: The Evolution of the Idea of Social Progress*, trans. Judith L. Greenberg (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

be acknowledged.³ Or perhaps it is something in the nature of the work itself. Editor Dominic Baker-Smith expresses it well: “The extraordinary way in which the title of More’s book has been appropriated by projectors of social idealism over a span of four centuries is some indication both of its strong appeal and its dangerous ambiguity.”⁴

But this tendency to appropriation and absorption is not new. Hugh Latimer, in a sermon printed in 1549 and preached before King Edward VI on 5 April at Westminster Place, makes a witty reference that nods to More’s work but also co-opts it. Taking 1 Samuel 8:1–3 as his text, on Samuel’s transfer of his judgeship to his unworthy sons, Latimer discusses the tendency of men in authority to fall. In a marginal note, replying to his own question “who is it whom the worlde doeth not corrupte and blynde at one tyme or other?” he answers, “The good man nemo otherwyse called nobody that dwelleth with vtopia.”⁵ In making a distinction between an aspirational ideal and lived experience in the world as we know it, Latimer riffs on More’s allegorical names: the *eu-* and *ou-*topia (good but also nowhere) and a new figure in Nemo (no one) in the vein of Hythlodæus (a speaker of nonsense). Francis Godwin’s work on the art of secret communication, *Nuncius Inanimatus* (1629), was printed (says the title page) in Utopia, a fitting reference for a work that promises to reveal “many secret ways of communication, hitherto unknown” but in the end never delivers on its promise.⁶ In the seventeenth century, royalists co-opted Utopia as a conceit, but in contradictory ways. A tract published in 1647 takes the form of a fictional letter from the king of Utopia (a stand-in for Charles I) which, strangely, references More’s *Utopia* as a defense of monarchy.⁷ In 1648, Utopia

3. Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

4. Dominic Baker-Smith, *More’s Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press / Renaissance Society of America Reprint Texts, 2000), vii.

5. Hugh Latimer, *The Seconde [sic] Sermon of Maister Hughe Latimer: Which He Preached before the Kynges Maiestie In His Graces Palayce at Westminster, Ye Xv. Day of Marche, M.Ccccxlix* (London, 1549).

6. Paul Cornelius, *Languages in Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century Imaginary Voyages* (Geneva: Droz, 1965), 40n3. Godwin is, of course, best known for his own imaginary voyage, *The Man in the Moon* (1638).

7. *The king of Vtopia his letter to the citizens of Cosmopolis, the metropolitan city of Vtopia. Together with the citizens answer thereunto, translated out of the Vtopian tongue, into broken English [...] Printed at*

is associated with the Puritan other in a published libel addressed to "severall of the most eminent perjur'd Rebels Assembled in Junto at Westminster," wishing to speed them on their way to "New-England, to Amsterdam, or Utopia."⁸

From philosophy to literature, the history of ideas to religion, and now fully infused throughout cultural studies, More's work and its evocative toponym are deployed across the humanities and social sciences, and even the natural sciences.⁹ Nor is it the sole property of the ivory tower. The public sphere owns it. A recent bestseller is able to evoke a *Utopia for Realists* in outlining bold plans for open borders, a fifteen-hour work week, and universal basic income as real-world solutions to a better, more fortunate society.¹⁰ Popular culture at large owns it. "Utopia" is one of the oldest running massive multiplayer online browser games. It is also the name of a classic rock band. Even Hollywood owns it. It is a central plot and character device in the modern fairy tale *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998) starring Drew Barrymore and the titular trope of the 2016 Disney animation, *Zootopia*.¹¹ IMDb lists dozens more films and television series that take *Utopia* as their title.

Cosmopolis in the year 7461 (London, 1647). See Gary Schneider, *Print Letters in Seventeenth-Century England: Politics, Religion, and News Culture* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 55–57. The conceit of a letter from Utopia is revisited in *A letter found in Utopia and from thence recommended by a very good hand to the perusal of the publisher wherein (among other things) a candid testimony to Mr. Sterryes learned and accurate Discourse of the freedom of the will lately printed: as also some reflections upon contending and disputing (as of late) about matters of religion [...]* (London, 1675); and John Dunton's *The informer's doom, or, An unseasonable letter from Utopia directed to the man in the moon giving a full and pleasant account of the arraignment, tryal, and condemnation of all those grand and bitter enemies that disturb and molest all kingdoms and states throughout the Christian world* (1683).

8. *Passes granted, by the free-born people of England. To severall of the most eminent perjur'd rebels assembled in junto at Westminster. Who are now desirous to transport themselves into New-England, to Amsterdam, or Utopia. A passe for the junto in generall. To all nations of the world greeting. Know you; these traytors of the English nation; ... if we heare you hang them up, we shall not shed a teare. Subscribed, by the long abused nation of England* (London, 1648).

9. Articles in medical sciences seem particularly fond of framing their studies in terms of "Utility versus Utopia" (in an article on "quality measurement affecting surgical practice"); "Reality or Utopia" (in an article on knee arthroplasty); or "Hope or Utopia" (in a neurological study on Alzheimer's) among similar formulations.

10. Rutger Bregman, *Utopia for Realists: And How We Can Get There* (New York: Little, Brown, 2017).

11. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, "Utopia, Dystopia, and Cultural Controversy in 'Ever After' and 'The Grimm Brothers' Snow White,'" *Movels & Tales* 16.2 (1 Nov 2002): 201–13, 208–09, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mat.2002.0023>. Dan Hassler-Forest, "Life Isn't Some Cartoon Musical': Neoliberal

A perusal of *Utopia*'s long titles across time (as well as across the spaces of the university library) is also a testament to changing understanding in the long reception history of this work. More's first title of 1516, *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia*, starts the whole bibliographic tradition off with a note of irony, presenting itself as a "golden" little book figuring forth "the best state of a republic," a republic that, it turns out, uses gold for its chamber pots. Later titles further confuse the biblio-generic signal. Ralph Robinson's English translation presents More's work with the disarming epithet of "A fruteful, and pleasaunt worke" (1551). From there, it is cast as "a Learned and Pleasant Discourse" (1639), "a Philosophical Romance" (1743), and more ominously, "an Impartial History ... Interspersed with Many Important Articles of Secret History, Relating to the State of the British Nation" (1751).¹² Just what kind of work is this?

Utopia, indeed, is many things. It is a distinct work of fiction, though one expressed in many manifestations, rarely read in its original language (Latin) or even in its earliest translations. Not received in the English of its own time, it seems more timeless even than the oeuvre of Shakespeare (with apologies to Ben Jonson). Utopia also is a genre, a paradigm that has been modelled and remodelled in countless cultural and historical contexts. As a no-place, it provides a platform for a fully realized other-world that finds expression in modern fantasy fiction (with a map and alphabet of its language provided), or of imagined travel beyond current limits, opening the way for science fiction. As a good or happy place, it provides a model for thought experiments on a society organized and administered in a better way than our own. Utopia is, perhaps most commonly, an idea—an idea most often espoused by people who have never read More's work. In the widest possible sense, Utopia is a

Identity Politics in *Zootopia* and *Orange Is the New Black*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 51.2 (2018): 356–78, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12658>.

12. *The Common-Wealth of Vtopia: Containing a Learned and Pleasant Discourse of the Best State of a Publike Weale, as It Is Found in the Government of the New Ile Called Vtopia*, trans. Ralph Robinson (London, 1639); *Utopia: Or the Happy Republic; a Philosophical Romance*, trans. Gilbert Burnet (Glasgow and Edinburgh, 1743); and *Utopia: Containing an Impartial History of the Manners, Customs, Polity, Government, &c. of That Island. Written in Latin by Sir Thomas More, Chancellor of England. And Interspersed with Many Important Articles of Secret History, Relating to the State of the British Nation*, trans. Gilbert Burnet (Oxford, 1751).

place subject to every individual's imagination—for some people, a concrete if imagined place of aspiration (the place we could, as a society, achieve) or one that we think exists somewhere in the world (that perfect beach featured in travel advertisements). In these latter extensions of the idea of Utopia we see how far we have come from More's seminal work and find an illustration of why it is always fruitful to return back to it. The work that is *Utopia* challenges these easy assumptions about what Utopia is, our reductive notions of what constitutes a good life, or how it might (or whether it can) be achieved, either for an individual or for our species. For More's *Utopia*, famously, is suggestive of a good place but in the end is no place at all. It remains a problem to work through, always and forever in process.

What we know as one of the most famous works of English literature was (in the first instance) neither written in English nor published in England, though it was most certainly written by an Englishman. The work and its central idea wandered promiscuously from the start. It was published in 1516 in Latin, in the city of Louvain/Leuven, with subsequent editions issued in Paris, Basel, and various other cities on the Continent. It was translated into German (1524), Italian (1548), French (1550), and Dutch (1553).¹³ The first English edition, both in language and place of publication, didn't arrive until 1551 with Ralph Robinson's translation, published in London. The ambiguities of the work itself create the conditions for its similarly wandering ways through Western culture. When we return to the work of literature, introductions alert us to why we continue to come back to More's text and the name associated with this wild and unruly idea, with remarks about the "profound" or even (as noted above) "dangerous" ambiguity of this "mercurial, jocoserious" work.¹⁴ As a work of literature, *Utopia* is complicated (and enriched) by its dialogic form, the subtle and ambiguous relationship between the narrative frame and the utopian narrative, and thus between its two narrators (Morus and Hythlodæus) and, further, between More the narrator, More the author, More the friend (within his initial circle of readers), and More the public statesman. And then there is the question of genre and mode complicated by questions of rhetoric. Is it

13. Terence Cave, *Thomas More's Utopia in Early Modern Europe: Paratexts and Contexts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), passim.

14. Respectively: St. Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. David Harris Sacks, trans. Ralph Robinson (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), ix; Baker-Smith, vii; Robert M. Adams, ed., *Utopia: A Revised Translation, Backgrounds, Criticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), vii.

satire, social critique, political theory, humanistic exercise, *jeu d'esprit*, or even an elaborate joke? Is it earnest or ironic?

The articles in this collection grew out of papers presented at a conference on the theme of "Utopia for 500 years," held at St. Thomas More College on the University of Saskatchewan campus in September 2016.¹⁵ On the occasion of the quincentenary of the publication of More's *Utopia*, an international group of scholars gathered to consider the cultural status and enduring resonance of this influential work and its central conception, the idea of a utopia, in all of its rich complexity. This collection is therefore interested not only in the long life of *Utopia* as a work of literature, but also its Utopia, and hence, utopia as a persistent generic and cultural topos.

The story of *Utopia's* long history, of course, goes back further than five hundred years. It did not arise entirely out of nowhere. And yet, in some ways, it created utopian fiction after the fact in giving us a label by which to reconsider and categorize earlier works of literature. Read retrospectively, through the lens of a fully-formed *Utopia*, other pre-Utopias begin to emerge. In situating More's work, scholars go back not only to Plato's *Republic*; in a book on *Utopias of the Classical World*, the editor draws samples of texts from such diverse writers as Homer, Xenophon, Diogenes, and Antisthenes.¹⁶ Daniel Regnier's article on "*Utopia's* Moorish Inspiration: Thomas More's Reading of Ibn Ṭufayl" adds to this list of proto-Utopias and enriches the history of *Utopia's* formation by examining possible lines of influence through the medieval Andalusian tradition. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it seems apposite to look beyond the western humanist tradition in attempting to understand the origins of ideas that were enabled by growing global geographical awareness and built on a sense of possibility inspired by encounters with the cultural "Other."

In "Real versus ideal': *Utopia* and the Early Modern Satirical Tradition," Bernd Renner revisits the question of genre to give *Utopia* a more prominent

15. The organizers of the conference and the editor of this volume would like to acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in the form of a Connections Grant (Principal Investigator, Sharon Wright) as well as St. Thomas More College and the College of Arts and Science at the University of Saskatchewan.

16. John Ferguson, *Utopias of the Classical World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975). Notions of a golden age and Eden and the medieval legend of the Land of Cockaigne are commonly cited as informing influences.

place in "the formation of a broader conception of satirical writing and the satiric mode." He shows how More adapted the received satiric tradition to create a new model that could be deployed to promote social change. In More's *Utopia* he locates a shift from satire as form (exemplified by Roman verse satire) to mode, tracing a line of influence from the Menippean satire of Lucian of Samosatus, through the *Ship of Fools* corpus, marking at the same time a transformation of satire into a tool of social critique and change. In the equivocal moments of the work, this developing mode breaks the binary between a deplorable reality and an unattainable idea. Utopia is presented as a construct, not simply to criticize European shortcomings, nor to offer actual workable solutions, but to create a space for critical thinking and an attitude of openness to new possibilities. Renner's article thus bridges the interests of literature (theoretical questions of form) and social critique (modern explorations of socio-political alternatives) outlined above.

A cluster of articles turns our attention to the reception of and response to *Utopia*/Utopia/utopia in its Renaissance context. Régis Closel's "Utopia and the Enclosing of Dramatic Landscapes" looks at ways in which More's *Utopia* informed dramatic discourse addressing changes and challenges in land usage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (specifically, the controversies involving land enclosure and engrossing), offering as illustrative examples the anonymous *Arden of Faversham* (performed in 1588 and printed in 1592) and Richard Brome's *Jovial Crew* (staged in 1641 and printed in 1652). In "[T]he fault of the man and not the poet': Sidney's Troubled Double Vision of Thomas More's *Utopia*," Daniel Lochman provides a new interpretation of Sidney's qualified praise of More's famous work in *The Defence of Poesie*. How is it that Sidney can praise More's work for presenting "the way of patterning a commonwealth" in his *Utopia*, yet fault "the man" but not "the poet" for some undisclosed flaw in *Utopia*'s execution? Lochman finds the answer elsewhere in the *Defence* where Sidney gives primary place to poetry that presents a "feigned image," in this instance a fully formed narrative fiction rather than (in the case of *Utopia*) simple dialogue. The article concludes with a reading of the imaginative narrative of Sidney's *Arcadia* (old and new) as a point of contrast to illustrate Sidney's critique of More's shortcomings.

Over time, *Utopia* has also become a generic signal for other works of literature and a launch pad for the imagination, blazing a trail for fictional alternate societies and establishing a framework for a new genre. Anne Lake

Prescott's keynote address at the conference (presented here much as she delivered it) provides a spirited tour of a several "Minor if Entertaining Post-Utopian Nowheres" that illustrate the appeal of this mode of writing and thought in the century-and-a-half after More's publication. Some of these turn Utopia "upside down and backwards," like the anonymous French utopia of *Antangil* (1616). Others seem little more than de-Freuded wish fulfillment dreams. Together, they testify to the many and contradictory purposes of the utopian prototype. Catherine Gimelli Martin's article, "All That Glitters: Devaluing the Gold Standard in the Utopias of Thomas More, Francis Bacon, and Margaret Cavendish," provides a reconsideration of two of More's more famous emulators, Francis Bacon and Margaret Cavendish, focusing on their handling of one of their predecessor's most defining features, the inversion of the cultural status of the gold standard. An ethic of use-value (rather than exchange-value) is seen as a central, economic principle in Utopia that radiates out to other aspects of social organization: matters of war and peace, religion, motivation and reward. What emerges is an early version of a knowledge economy, where gold in its various uses is subordinated in service to discovering new inventions and solutions to social problems, effectively ending economic competition and fostering personal as well as social well-being. The results are remarkably practical societies that seem to be able to curb the worst human impulses and bring out the best in human capability.

A later inheritance of the utopian genre is the inverse, the dystopia. One might say that, even in More, utopia implies dystopia. In his article on "More, Huxley, Eggers, and the Utopian/Dystopian Tradition," Peter Herman finds a new avenue into the complexities and apparent contradictions of More's work, pointing to some elements of utopia that latter-day readers have found unsettling, even dystopic, and asks us to consider whether this might not be a function of the situation of its readership. An evaluation of the desirability of a social solution depends very much on one's relationship to the problem it is meant to address. Looking at the tension between (from some perspectives) dubious solutions to problems that, in their historical context, are compelling, leaves us to sort out whether the solution really is a problem worse than the problem it was offered to address. Herman applies and tests this model of reading on two technological dystopias closer to our own situation as modern readers: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, reflecting the anxieties of the early twentieth century, and David Eggers's *The Circle*, providing a disturbing

reflection of the utopian claims of our own always-connected world of social media. This article is an important corrective to the uncritical (and sometimes naive) use of "utopian" in promoting new social schemes in the present.

One final note: given *Utopia's* multilingual status, contributors are given free rein in their rendering of characters' names and choice of translations/editions.