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Thomas More and the “genius” of *Utopia*

Abstract: Was Thomas More a “genius”? This essay examines the meaning and English translation of the Latin word *ingenium* in the prefatory letters to the 1518 edition of *Utopia*. In the context of the classical oratorical tradition and its important iteration and adjustment in *De copia* (1512–34), the uses of *ingenium* indicate how humanist readers of *Utopia* assessed More’s rhetorical abilities.

Keywords: genius, *ingenium*, classical oratory, *Utopia*, Thomas More, *De copia*, Erasmus

Résumé: Thomas More était-il un “génie”? Cet article s’intéresse au sens de la traduction anglaise du mot latin *ingenium* dans les lettres préfaçant l’édition de 1518 de l’*Utopie*. Dans le contexte de la tradition oratoire classique et de ses importantes répétitions et adaptations dans le *De copia* (1512–34), les emplois d’*ingenium* peuvent nous révéler comment les lecteurs humanistes de l’*Utopie* ont évalué les compétences rhétoriques de More.

Mots clés: génie, *ingenium*, art oratoire classique, *Utopie*, Thomas More, *De copia*, Erasme

It may be good to alter the meaning of a word, but it is bad to let
any part of the meaning drop.—John Stuart Mill¹

Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) and Peter Giles (1486–1533), in their prefatory letters to the 1518 edition of *Utopia*, employ the Latin word *ingenium* in their description of Thomas More (1478–1535).² Both authors use this term to laud what G. C. Richards’ longstanding translation renders as “genius.”³ Robert M. Adams, in the more recent

¹ John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic*, 8th edn. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 479. First published in 1843.

² *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 4, *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 2/10, 3/12, 22/17, 23/19–20. Hereafter cited internally as *CW* with page and line number. On the original 1518 edition upon which this edition is based, see *Ibid.*, clxxxvii–clxxxix.

³ Richards’ translation was first published in 1923 and endures because it is the basis of the still influential Yale edition of 1979. See the acknowledgments of *Ibid.* at vii. For an incisive and brief review of all English translations, see “A Note on the Translation” in