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## The difference theology makes: a reflection on the first margin note in Thomas More's *Utopia*

**Abstract:** Because the distinction between *mendacium dicere* and *mentiri* is taken from a pre-Christian text on grammar, *Utopia*'s opening margin note about a “theological difference” between uttering a falsehood and lying has long been seen as ironic or an instance of playful misdirection. Without denying these conclusions, this essay argues that the distinction *is* theological insofar as it reflects the theology of St. Augustine, especially as presented in his early “Cassiciacum” dialogues. *Utopia*'s first and arguably most important margin note is even more ironic than previously thought.

**Keywords:** Thomas More, *Utopia*, Augustine of Hippo, Cassiciacum, De ordine, Soliloquia, lying, lies, mendacium, Nigidius, Gellius

**Résumé:** Puisque la distinction entre *mendacium dicere* et *mentiri* est issue d'un texte sur la grammaire, antérieur au christianisme, la première note dans la marge de l'*Utopie*, à propos d'une «différence théologique» entre *dire des mensonges* et *mentir* a longtemps été considérée comme ironique ou comme un exemple d'erreur amusante. Sans vouloir remettre en question ces conclusions, cette étude démontre que la distinction est de nature théologique dans la mesure où elle reflète la théologie de saint Augustin, notamment telle qu'elle présentée dans ses premiers dialogues de «Cassiciacum». La note de marge initiale, sans doute la plus importante, de l'*Utopie* est donc encore plus ironique qu'on ne le croyait.

**Mots clés:** Thomas More, *Utopie*, Augustin d'Hippone, Cassiciacum, De ordine, Soliloquia, mentir, mensonges, mendacium, Nigidius, Gellius

In his opening letter to Peter Giles added to *Utopia* in 1516, Thomas More writes: “For just as I am taking as much care as possible lest there be anything false in the book, so too, if anything is in doubt, I would rather say what is false than lie; for I would rather be good than prudent” (*nam ut maxime curabo ne quid sit in libro falsi, ita si quid sit in ambiguo, potius mendacium dicam quam mentiar, quod malim bonus esse quam prudens*) (40/27–9).<sup>1</sup> Abutting this remark is the first in

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of *Utopia* are taken from *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 4, *Utopia*, eds. Edward Surtz, S. J. and Jack H. Hexter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965). Volumes from the Yale edition are hereafter cited as *CW*.