

*Moreana* 54.1 (2017): 120–128  
© Amici Thomae Mori  
www.eupublishing.com/more

**Lawrence Wilde**, *Thomas More's Utopia: Arguing for Social Justice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 133 pp.

Lawrence Wilde argues that through *Utopia* Thomas More advocates not only philosophical contemplation but, more importantly, serious consideration of practical political reforms. Although the book's literary form has swayed scholars from recognizing its contribution to political thought, Wilde claims that the dialogue between More and Raphael Hythloday bodes against unchecked accumulation of both wealth and power and offers a political and economic alternative that, although not perfect, addresses the root of social injustice. *Utopia* bids readers to seek stronger measures for promoting equal distribution of goods and greater participation of citizens in political rule.

The bulk of Wilde's defense of Hythloday's view stems from his analysis of parallels between the mariner's perspective and More's actual attempts to alleviate injustices in his positions of government. These similarities and what Wilde claims to be the dialogue's progressive refutation of the narrator Morus (i.e., the Latin form of More's name that is used to distinguish the narrator from the author) lead Wilde to interpret Morus' final rejection of *Utopia*'s alternative form of government as ironic.

The first chapters of Wilde's analysis present relevant background on More's life and survey scholarly interpretations of *Utopia* with speculation as to reasons for their inadequate grasp of the author's political intentions. Among the problems he notes are the focus on the book as satire and a consequent evasion of its serious political, economic, and social criticism in favor of its power to shock, entertain, and pose philosophical questions. Wilde also claims that those who label the book as a forerunner of socialism identify the author's view with Hythloday's and neglect the validity of Morus' objections. Wilde points out that others who, on the other hand, conflate More's position with that of Morus miss the irony of Morus' final assessment and overlook the similarity between the Utopian lifestyle and the monastic one that More cherished. Wilde agrees with critics who note the opposition between *Utopia*'s strict morality and the optimism of More's humanism. However, Wilde remarks that More was influenced by St. Augustine's theology of the Fall as much as he was by the Greeks, that the peaceful conditions in *Utopia* outshine the social conditions of states at that time, and that Hythloday's description fails to account for how individual Utopians personally experienced life there. Wilde applauds J. H. Hexter's 1952 appraisal of More's sincere promotion of

communism under the influence of Plato and the first Christians. He contrasts More's stand with that of the early Christians, though, in terms of their vision for the future: they considered communism impossible in a fallen world, and More portrays its feasibility through means of reason. To critics who use the disparity between Hythloday's optimism and Morus' pragmatism as an excuse for resignation in the face of injustice, Wilde asserts that More actually advocates moderate changes through Hythloday's mention of less radical reforms before dismissing them in favor of Utopia. Although Wilde associates More with socialism, he distinguishes More's approach as a non-violent one that avoids civil unrest, as is evident in More's condemnation of the Anabaptists in *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*. Wilde closes his first chapter with what he sees as key to discerning the fine line between the sincerity of More's skepticism of Utopian policies on war and religion and the irony of his ultimate objection to Utopia's dismissal of noble qualities supposedly pivotal to a republic: "sincere objections are delivered without elaboration, followed by an insincere one garnished with gushing rhetoric" (19).

In his second chapter, Wilde explains how Christian humanism grounds human reasoning in religious principles such as those fundamental to Utopian religion: the immortality of the soul and the punishment or reward for one's deeds after death. When referring to More's translation of the *Life of Pico*, Wilde recounts a dialogue that parallels More's attempt to convince Hythloday to advise kings: Pico receives advice not to neglect the New Testament role of Martha when shifting to the contemplative life of Mary (Wilde has these two biblical names interchanged). Wilde claims that the examples of Pico and John Colet increased More's attraction to a life of poverty. While pointing out More's conclusion in *The Last Things* (1522) that excessive desire for wealth rather than ownership of it is sinful, Wilde claims that More recognized the moral dilemma in possession itself. Wilde also notes that in *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (1534), More affirms that society flourishes when it can depend upon citizens with resources. Yet, Wilde asserts that the dialogue shows an awareness that not enough wealth is voluntarily shared to cover the needs of the poor and that, consequently, a fair distribution of goods should be conducted. In this chapter, Wilde provides historic details on sixteenth-century monarchies, treaties, church tensions, and economic distress that illuminate the novelty and logic of some Utopian policies.

The next three chapters closely examine and compare Utopia's government, economy, and social structure with those current across Europe in the early sixteenth-century and draw out implications for societies today. In describing the political structure of Utopia, Wilde highlights Utopia's widely representative government, and explains how some of its stringent policies function together as built-in

protection against private manipulation of public matters. Upon praising Utopia's system of increasing citizen involvement in decision-making, though, Wilde seems to overlook how one policy seriously threatens the free exchange of ideas among people and their representatives: execution for discussing public affairs outside of the senate or assembly. The extremity of this penalty would cause anyone to shrink back from making the slightest insinuation that could be misinterpreted along these lines. In his section outlining Utopia's economic system, Wilde addresses Morus' earlier objections that it eliminates the incentive to work and causes social unrest. Before explaining the conditions in Utopia that facilitate leisure and a fresh attitude toward work, Wilde cites More's letter to a monk that exposes his recognition of the common aversion to using private possessions for the public good. By implying that this observation denotes More's his resignation to popular vice rather than his challenge to growth in virtue, Wilde suggests that the correspondence sets forth the probable basis of More's agreement with Utopia's communism. However, Wilde does offer many astute reflections justifying More's portrayal of Utopian policies. For instance, he cites their use of slaves to perform acts Utopians consider morally disdainful as More's way of probing the very grounds of slavery.

In the sixth chapter, Wilde discusses Utopia's policies of punishment, war, and religion. He attributes, for instance, the strict sexual mores to the society's attempt to preserve the family and extended family unit and to More's notion of human frailty when deprived of the sacraments, as are Utopians in their non-Christian society. While Wilde notes parallels between traditional just war theory and Utopia's practices, he does address Utopia's appallingly deceitful methods of eliminating enemy leaders by inciting assassination rather than calling for war. Wilde suggests that such measures highlight the very repugnance of war itself and the corruption it inspires, hardly a more licit means to peace although more socially acceptable among readers than Utopia's practices against princes. Wilde claims that Utopia's religious tolerance for all but the rejection of core beliefs reflects More's conviction that social order depends upon belief in, for instance, the immortality of the soul and the punishment for vice and reward for virtue in the afterlife. At this point, however, Wilde offers an explanation that does not corroborate with More's actual belief as conveyed, for instance, in More's 1529 Dialogue Concerning Heresies. He states that Utopia upholds one of More's convictions that formed part of his refutation of Luther: that humans can be saved by their good deeds (95, 104). In consonance with Roman Catholic teachings, More believes that virtuous works, for instance, going to Mass or caring for the sick, can contribute to salvation but are not the primary cause of it; rather, they must be accompanied by faith since grace brings about redemption through human correspondence to it.

The seventh chapter addresses the opposing views of More the author and of Hythloday while delineating what Wilde interprets as their agreement on shorter-term remedies for improving society. He points out More's contribution to political theory as the first to examine the root cause of poverty and to approach punishment with an eye toward rehabilitation. Wilde likens the purpose of Utopia to that of the fool in the first book: to prick consciences and to heighten an uncomfortable awareness of injustices to be addressed.

The epilogue probes More's justification for defying the King on religious matters after having suppressed those who did so earlier as heretics. In this section, Wilde considers the details of this controversy as portrayed in Robert Bolt's 1960 play made into film, *A Man for All Seasons*, and the distortion of them as alluded to in Hilary Mantel's 2009 novel made into the television series, *Wolf Hall*. Wilde explains the facts of More's dilemma, accusations, and trial that sent him to the Tower and, with reference to his letters written there, Wilde offers valuable insight into More's understanding of conscience not as a unique, individual voice but as a voice that accords with the teachings of Christendom throughout the ages.

*Ann Marie Klein, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, USA*

DOI: 10.3366/more.2017.0011